OCTOBER

25 cents

BLUE BOOK

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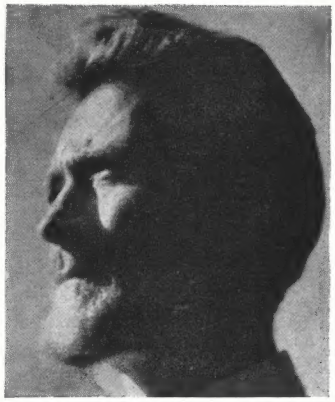
Torpedo Twitch. . . . . *an authentic seaplane-pilot story, by* **ARCH WHITEHOUSE**

Who's Who in Blue Book

GORDON YOUNG



Gordon Young

I WAS born in Ray Co., Mo., in 1886, near the home and stamping-ground of Jesse James and grew up thinking of him as a hero, but later information modified that.

Can't remember when I learned to ride a horse; but do remember that an uncle, a bronco-buster from Colorado, saddled up a horse that had never been ridden and tied him before the stile at my grandfather's and went into the house for something. I was not over six, just big enough to be a fool, and I untied the horse, brought him alongside the riding-block, got into the saddle and jogged off. Grandma, uncle, aunts all came into the pasture, waved, yelled, begged. I rode up and got off. My uncle got on and the horse tried to kill him. Figure it out for your own self.

I've been thrown hard and far since. In 1901 I began to work for Fred Harvy's X Y on the Colorado side of the Colorado-Kansas border. A bunch of us rode into a church box-social in a Kansas town one night. After the supper we got on our horses. I was a good enough rider and thought I'd show off. I thumbed the horse; I had never thumbed her before and I never did again. You thumb a horse by leaning forward in the saddle and running your thumbs hard up along each side of the neck —and the horse doesn't like it. I hit the ground on the back of my neck with a lot of people looking on, some of them pretty people.

There were a lot of old-timers drifting about those days and they liked listeners; they and the precious volumes of the Kansas Historical Society gave me the facts and fancies for the railroad story; all I did was put them together.

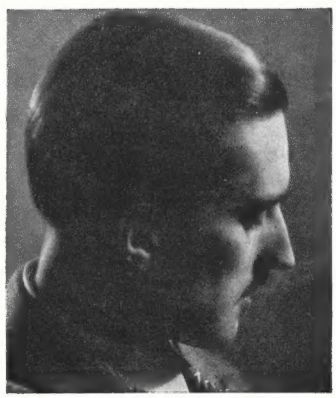
Once hunting was a passion; then came a time when I liked to see game drop but I didn't want to walk over and pick it up. Now I won't shoot at much of anything but black spots on paper—and sometimes miss them.

WILLIAM NEIDIG

William Neidig

HE was born near Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the son of an editor. He grew up with the normal American boy's ambition to become a baseball pitcher; but Stanford University called to him and he went to California. Here he remained for some years after his graduation, as free-lance writer, dramatic critic, contributor to magazines, and so on. Since then he has edited magazines, taught English in three universities, served as corporation president in Chicago. He has taken out between thirty and forty United States patents. One of his inventions found use in the United States navy. He has written serials and many short stories for the magazines, also novels and plays, as well as a book of verse good enough to be published by Macmillan.

NELSON BOND



Nelson Bond

THIS man Bond claims he is not nearly so much of a whacky-pot as his *Blue Book* stories might indicate. Of late he has been disturbed by the monotonous pattern of his life: his weight, duckpin average, golf score and usual bank balance being almost identical—all in the low 100's!

He and his wife Betty maintain a home (which he calls "Sans Sou," not "Sans Souci") in Roanoke, Va., for their owner —a tolerant Afghan hound named Barberryhill Phillip—intermittent coveys of guests and a very small *kobold* named Jorkins, who collaborates with Bond on stories. We much doubt, however, any participation on the part of Jorkins in that mature if imaginative story "The Bookshop," which begins on page 96 of this issue.

In Memoriam

BACK in 1928 the young lady at the reception-desk in Chicago phoned and said: "General Pershing wants to see you." We told her to send the General in; and presently Leland Jamieson appeared: six feet three, in full uniform—he was an instructor in combat-flying at Kelly Field at the time. . . . Early in July of this year, after a long illness, he died at the untimely age of thirty-seven.

He had a lot out of life in those thirty-seven years: a fortunate marriage, and a fine young son and daughter; and he kept up his flying as a pilot for Eastern Airlines after he left the Army. He wrote for *Blue Book* nearly fifty stories; and two novels as well as some short stories of his appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Anyone who writes for publication goes to confession, it has been said. You who read his stories know that he was one of the best ever.

BLUE BOOK

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Except for stories of Real Experiences, all stories and novels printed herein are fiction and are intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or to actual events. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence.

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READERS' FORUM

A BOOKMARK TOO?

The new Blue Book is better than ever, and we can now say that it has a distinctly attractive appearance. This wider form is much easier to handle than the older type.

Your experiment with using both the two-column and three-column page is one which I hope you will continue as a permanent practice. Some stories naturally appear better in two columns, while others are more easily read in three columns. I like both types in each issue.

But there is one improvement which I believe Blue Book can make. Why not lengthen the back cover so that the upper part of it can be turned down and used as a marker? This would enable to reader to mark the place he wants to begin reading a particular story. This provision of a marker for its readers would be an addition to the many reasons why Blue Book is the best magazine of its type on the market today.

James G. Towery,
Atlanta, Ga.

FOR THE MERCHANT MARINE

I am a librarian, or more precisely the custodian of the Seattle branch of the A.M.M.L.A. On nearly every American ship calling at this port I place a case of books and a bundle of seventy magazines. First on the list is Blue Book. I never can get enough of them to go around. I bring to the consideration of their entertainment value for American seamen a hard-boiled critical attitude. If the magazines I place with the crew are not O.K., I soon hear about it. Now and again on the electric trolleys, or by my fireside, I'll read every page of Blue Book. In the April issue I read "Berlin Masquerade" by Frederick Painton, and as an ex-corporal of the First World War I want to thank him and Blue Book. It was a splendid performance, the best I've read in a decade: "There is no darkness but ignorance." Stories of this type that portray the grim horror of modern war, and its effect on their perpetrators, are essential to our enlightenment, lest we forget and become the blind slaves of Mars instead of the intelligent defenders of democracy.

Arthur Herbert Forder,
Seattle, Wash.

THE OLD ARMY SPEAKS

Your July issue contains a letter from a man who has been a reader of Blue Book Magazine nearly as long as I have. I say "nearly," for while I

(Continued on inside back cover)

SOME

Out of a job in New York, he stumbled upon the Arabian Nights adventures of the Eight Gates.

"Let me wish you luck," she said. "You'll need it."

LIKE many another of us, Jim Hardesty was broke and out of a job when it happened. Oddly enough, that is just the time when such crazy things do happen; otherwise, where would be the hope in this shabby world? Only when one fights for existence is the help of the gods attracted; the supine moocher on destiny draws no luck.

Hardesty was slow to recognize this inexorable fact. When he struck hands with the amazing Arabian Nights adventure of the Eight Gates, it seemed like fantastic nonsense.

He was twenty-four, dark, slow-spoken, and a fighter. When the brokerage office closed, he was caught with scanty savings. For two months he had been waging a gradually losing battle, combing every avenue from employment offices to want ads. On the day he walked into the great hotel he was down to his last dollar.

He entered the citadel of swank and splendor, this small city within a great city, by the Park Avenue doors, as in the old days when money was easy. Scrimson, one of the assistant managers, had formerly been an employee of his father's and would know him personally; he was making his pride-swallowing appeal to Scrimson. He wanted anything, even dishwashing.

So Hardesty, neatly clad as ever, found Scrimson on the lobby floor and put the case to him squarely, without shame. Scrimson was a heavy-jowled man instinct with authority.

"You know my background," Hardesty said. "College and a brokerage office. My family's gone; my father died when the crash came; my mother passed away three years ago. I've a head for figures, a personable appearance, a fair order of intelligence and excellent muscles. Somewhere, I should fit in here. A job as sweeper, chauffeur, laundryman—anything."

Scrimson fingered his lip. "Mr. Hardesty, d'ye have any idea how many thousand people here in New York have those precise qualifications or better, and the same ambition? I'll grant that you have something apart: personality. But there's nothing I can do for you."

"Who shovels your coal? I can do that."

"No, I'm sorry, honestly sorry. Let me bear it in mind for a few days. Drop in the first of the week; something may turn up in the interim."

Just then she passed.

For an instant their eyes met. Hardesty was not staring, but he could not help looking; in that huge lobby, she reached out and attracted everyone. Youth? Certainly. Beauty? He did not know. It was no question of beauty. She was a vivid force; that fleeting exchange of glances, that instant as their eyes met, he got the impression of a peculiar vibrancy.

"Who on earth," he exclaimed, glancing after her, "is that?"

Scrimson hemmed discreetly.

"A Miss Negli," he rejoined. "From somewhere in Asia, I understand; a war refugee of some sort. We have a good many such people in the house just now. Well, Mr. Hardesty, you drop in again and—"

"I'll do that, perhaps; thanks a lot, and I'm glad to have seen you again." Hardesty shook hands and turned away. He went over to the news-stand, bought an early edition of an afternoon paper, and sat down long enough to note a few *Help Wanted* items.

His desperate effort had been fruitless; well, he had expected nothing else, really. Finishing the column in question, he folded the paper, rose, and started back for the Park Avenue entrance. At this instant he heard his name being called:

"Mr. Hardesty! Mr. Hardesty!"

He turned to see a page approaching him. The bellman came up to him and spoke.

"Mr. Hardesty? Mr. Scrimson would like to speak with you. This way, sir."

With a sudden gleam of hope, Hardesty followed to the office of the assistant manager, behind the reception desk, and walked in. Scrimson, seated at a desk littered with papers, scowled at him most unaccountably and motioned to a chair.

"Sit down, Mr. Hardesty. Glad the boy caught you. I've an address here for you. It seems that one of the house guests noticed you talking with me and phoned to ask who you were—some fancied resemblance, perhaps. When I explained, I was instructed to give you this address, with word that you will find work there if you care to take it."

Hardesty, astonished, took the slip of paper handed him. On it was jotted the name of John Cavendeen, of Cavendeen & Carver, Attorneys, at an address in upper Fifth Avenue.

"Well, this is certainly an amazing thing!" he exclaimed.

CALL IT LUCK

by H. BEDFORD-JONES

"It is," said Scrimson with an air of distaste. "It's all of that."

"Who was the house guest?"

"I can't tell you that. To be frank, I don't know that I like the affair at all. It's most unusual." Scrimson was distinctly ruffled. "You are to go to that address at ten in the morning. That's all I can say."

HARDESTY departed, too excited to let Scrimson's manner irritate him. A hoax? Possibly. On the other hand, it might be a lucky break; and that was something he needed badly. He left the hotel by the Lexington Avenue entrance, stopped in at a tavern, bought a glass of beer and consumed as much free lunch as possible, then looked through a telephone book. Yes, the Cavendeen firm was listed; that much was real, at least.

Saving a dime for breakfast, he shot the rest of his dollar for dinner that evening. Luckily, his room rent was paid ahead, to the first of the month.

At nine-forty-five next morning, he entered the building that housed the office of Cavendeen & Carver. And, as he approached the elevator, he came face to face with her again. Sheer amazement halted him in his tracks. Then, as their eyes met, he was aware of the same queer play of forces he had sensed in the hotel lobby—a warming, penetrating vibrancy as of ultrasonic waves that one felt yet could not feel. And she stopped, smiling, speaking his name.

"Good morning, Mr. Hardesty! I see you're keeping the appointment."

Confusion swamped him, as he comprehended.

"Oh, good morning! So it was you—the mysterious good-deed-for-the-day person!"

"Of course it was. Will you forgive me?" She spoke gravely, her smile gone. Still he was only vaguely aware of details—her rich, deep voice, the golden dusky rose of her features, the instant appeal that she made to every fiber of him. It was like meeting someone he had known long since and lost awhile.

"Something about you struck me," she was saying. "It seemed to me you might be the very person Mr. Cavendeen was looking for, and I brought you to his attention. That was all. Again, will you forgive me? You see, I asked Mr. Scrimson who you were, and he told me."

"Forgive you? That's the wrong way to look at it," said Hardesty, fumbling for words. "If this comes to anything, I owe you thanks, and much more. I can't tell you how I feel about it—about everything." He checked himself abruptly, under her gaze.

"Don't thank me. I understand that it's a pretty desperate venture," she replied, still gravely. "It was only because of something in your eyes, in your face, in your manner. . . . Well, there it is. 'Eight are the gates'—you are aware of the quotation?"

"No," he said, bewildered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You will, perhaps." She put out her hand to him, and he took it mechanically. "I may have done wrong, after all. I hope not. Good-by, and let me wish you luck; I'm afraid you'll need it."

She passed on toward the street entrance. Hardesty, with a catch of his breath, stepped into a waiting elevator. It was all unreal; it was like a dream, this meeting; her words reduced things to logical bases, yet left him even more bewildered than before. "Eight are the gates"—what the deuce had she meant by that cryptic phrase?

The doors opened; he stepped off at his floor, and walked into a prosaic, musty office. The receptionist took his name. He was sent on at once, and found himself in a rather dingy private office where a gaunt, grizzled man sat at a desk and glowered at him.

"Mr. Hardesty? Very good. You're five minutes ahead of time," said Cavendeen accusingly, and snapped an interphone switch. "Give me the report on Mr. Hardesty, please."

A secretary entered with typed sheets. Cavendeen gestured to a chair and Hardesty sat down. He was gradually coming alert, and a good thing, too, for the lawyer glanced up and began the most incredible conversation he had ever heard.

"So; the report's not so bad, Mr. Hardesty."

"I understand you're representing Miss Negli?" Hardesty ventured.

"I am not," snapped Cavendeen. He had a face like a skull, all skin and bone. "We represent the Chosan Import & Export Corporation and no one else, in this matter. Are you willing to earn—and I say *earn*—from half a million to a million dollars?"

"Just try me," said Hardesty. He did not take the words seriously, until he met the cold gaze of Cavendeen.

"Very well; it is no occasion for levity." Cavendeen's tone conveyed the impression of active dislike. "We represent the Chosan Corporation, as I say. This corporation was formerly of great wealth, but its owner and organizer was killed last year in the bombing of Chungking, and thanks to the Oriental upsets and Japanese-Axis activities, there's nothing much left except certain tangible and intangible assets. Your work will be to collect them. We are helpless legally. Such, in brief, is the situation."

CAVENDEEN pushed across the desk a sheaf of banknotes, and another sheaf of documents.

"Here is a thousand dollars expense-money. Here is a power of attorney which empowers you to make settlements on behalf of the corporation; one-third of the amounts collected will belong to you. We can give no assistance; you are strictly on your own. Your judgment will be final in all matters. If you fail, we're no worse off."

Obviously, Mr. Cavendeen expected failure. Hardesty's incredulity mounted, but he pulled himself together with an effort.

"Here are the documents in the case of our claim against Foster Beldridge for three hundred thousand dollars, the first subject of settlement," pursued Cavendeen. "You'll find them self-explanatory. And here is a copy of the agreement between us for your signature; I'll call in a notary." Cavendeen pressed a button as he spoke. "That is all, Mr. Hardesty. If you can settle this claim, do so; there is no time limit, there are no conditions. Upon your settlement of this first claim, the next will be presented to you. Do you wish to accept the task?"

Cavendeen's attitude was anything but sympathetic; Hardesty, nettled, leaped to the alert. Faced by the direct question, he plunged.

"Yes. What's the joker, if I may ask, in this particular case?"

"The joker," said Cavendeen flintily, "is that from the moment you present the claim, your life won't be worth a plugged dime; you're undertaking the impossible. Here's the agreement, should you still wish to go through with it."

A secretary had entered and stood ready with notarial seal. Hardesty, his bewilderment accentuated by the dry, sardonic words, ran his eye over the agreement. It was brief, presenting the contract almost in Cavendeen's words. He took the pen handed him and signed the two copies. The secretary legalized them. Hardesty accepted one and pocketed it with the other papers. The money was in his pocket; the dream was reality.

OUTSIDE, he took a taxicab to his unpretentious lodgings. The whole transaction with Cavendeen had occupied scarcely twenty minutes—and he had a thousand dollars in his pocket, a hundred thousand more to his account if he could get it.

Such were the cold facts, indisputable. All because a young woman had noticed him in a hotel lobby and had put him in touch with the right man. All? In his heart he knew better. There was far more to it; just what, he could not tell. "Eight are the gates" . . . What on earth did those words mean or imply?

He turned to the documents; there were only three. One was a notation of shipments of tung oil and other products handled by Foster Beldridge, a confidential agent of the Chosan Corporation here in New York, totaling $303,000 over a two-year period.

Attached was a recent letter to Cavendeen from Beldridge whose office was in a building on Forty-Second Street; it was curt and clear.

> "Your alleged claim is ridiculous. I shall resist to the limit any such attempt at a holdup, for it is nothing more. Any attempt at legal action will be met as it deserves."

The third document was his own power of attorney.

Hardesty regarded these papers with acute dismay. Legally helpless, Cavendeen had said. Why? Business was not conducted in such a manner. Was it possible, reflected Hardesty, that this was really some attempt at a holdup and he had become a tool of crooks? The lack of further information was suspicious; also, it was irritating.

"What am I supposed to do, send the guy a bill?" he muttered. "Fight him; with what, and how? A desperate venture—my life not worth a plugged dime! What fantastic rot!"

He went to the telephone and called Larry Gentry, a personal friend, who was a source of varied information in the financial district. Gentry listened to his request and spoke.

"I've no data on Chosan, Jim; I don't know where you'd get it, though I've heard they're represented here by Cavendeen & Carver, a conservative, highly reputable firm of lawyers. Chosan was a cartel, a huge organization, very active in the Orient. Apparently dropped out of sight a year or so ago. It was supposedly connected with the Chinese government. Sorry to be so vague, but it's out of our line."

So Cavendeen was highly reputable, eh? Well, that was something learned. And Beldridge? Here he drew blank; Foster Beldridge was unknown.

Hardesty pocketed his documents and money and went downtown. He reopened his vanished bank-account, enjoyed a hearty luncheon and walked into the building on Forty-second Street resolved to take the bull by the horns. He found that Beldridge's office was on the eighteenth floor.

It proved to be a small single-roomed office with only the name on the door. Hardesty walked in; his man sat at a desk by the window—a tall, lean man of forty, black-haired, with black mustache and a face like an eagle, thinly carved, high-nosed, predatory. He viewed the intruder with keen challenge.

"Mr. Beldridge, my name's Hardesty. I'm handling some business for the Chosan Import & Export people, and one of their claims is a large one against you."

To Hardesty's astonishment, Beldridge rose up to his lean length, a smile split the dark features, and he waved his visitor to a chair by the desk. There was no explosion at all.

"Sit down, Mr. Hardesty! Glad to see you. Have a cigar. Look around you; does this look like the office of a man who has embezzled a quarter of a million or better?"

Hardesty complied. True, there was not so much as a stenographer; the office was bare. A small bookcase, an ornate calendar on the wall, a filing cabinet and a typewriter on a desk extension—this was all.

"Well," said Hardesty, "it might look like the office of a man who doesn't let his left hand know what his right dips into. No cigar, thanks."

For an instant Beldridge's dark eyes lunged at him with vicious probing; then the smile returned; Beldridge resumed his seat, picked up a pencil and played with it as he studied his visitor.

"You know that this claim is wholly fraudulent, sir? Fraudulent!" he reiterated with emphasis. "That's my position, very simply. You're in the collection business, are you?"

"No; I'm associated with Chosan only."

"You surprise me. Chosan is defunct; it was wiped out of existence by the Jap bombings of Chungking and its head offices destroyed." The black brows drew down. "Have you any proof of your connection?"

Hardesty produced his power of attorney and Beldridge glanced over it.

"I presume you're an innocent party. At one time I was connected with this outfit; I understand they're operating a hold-up racket against their former agents and so forth. You don't get a red cent out of me, sir."

"I don't want a red cent," said Hardesty cheerfully. "I'm after $303,000, more or less."

Beldridge laughed harshly. "You're empowered to make a settlement, eh? Good. Let me have your name and address. I like your spirit. I'm expecting by every mail some reports covering certain claims of my own against Chosan. When they come, I'll get into touch with you. It may be that we can reach an agreement somewhere along the line."

Complete failure here, Beldridge remained master of the situation, and Hardesty departed with futility to chew upon. And yet, somehow, that bare, one-man office stuck in his mind. It just didn't go with any $303,000 claim; the whole thing looked more cockeyed than ever. And why would Beldridge want to reach any agreement at all, if he were not liable?

BY evening, Hardesty learned that Beldridge was unknown in the financial district and had no credit rating; why an office in this expensive building, then? No answer. But as he lay awake that night, pondering, something occurred to him with a jerk; that ornate calendar on Beldridge's wall. His memory pictured its semi-nude blonde, and the legend below: Tanahi Trading Company. He leaped out of bed and tried the telephone book. Eureka! The Tanahi Company was on upper Broadway.

There was the clue; he had only to make certain of it. This he did at nine in the morning, by calling Tanahi and asking for the manager.

"This is Climax Steel," he said smoothly and rapidly. "We're dealing

with a Mr. Foster Beldridge. He has no credit rating but he has referred us to you as a reference."

"Oah, yes, yes!" came the immediate response. "He is ver' honest and fine man, sir. An old client of ours, yes! We guarantee him."

That settled it. Hardesty was nobody's fool. Beldridge, no doubt with some Oriental background, was simply an undercover man for the Tanahi concern and perhaps for others as well; in these days of threatening war and preferred shipments, an American buyer was a huge asset to foreign concerns.

"Which is enlightening, but of no assistance," thought Hardesty. "I can't very well blackmail him for three hundred thousand! Though I'd like to, well enough!"

HE reached for the telephone again, called the hotel and asked for Miss Negli. He was down to earth now, his bewilderment gone. When he heard her voice, he spoke coolly.

"This is James Hardesty, Miss Negli. I'd like very much to see you, if I may. I'm getting a focus on things, and need some information.

"Very well," she rejoined. "In the lobby by the mail desk, in twenty minutes."

"Thanks a lot."

She was ahead of him. As he walked across the huge lobby, he saw her on the corner divan next the mail desk, a telegram in her lap. She smiled and gave him her hand; his heart turned over. There was something in her radiant energy, her dark and flashing beauty, that flung him off balance.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry!" she exclaimed. "After you phoned, this telegram came; it's tremendously important and I'll have to rush away. Sit down for just five minutes, do! Ask your questions and I'll tell you whatever I can."

"Right." And laying aside his hat, Hardesty made himself comfortable. "First, why did you pitch me into this job, Miss Negli? There must have been a reason."

"Why did you ask Mr. Scrimson who I was?" she countered, her eyes twinkling.

"Eh?" Hardesty flushed. "Oh, that's different! You're no ordinary person; you're a being made of lovely old silk and moongleams on distant water; you yourself are the only excuse I needed. But *you* must have had some reason."

"I did," she said softly. "I had a brother killed in China. Something in your air, in your manner, as you stood talking to Mr. Scrimson, reminded me vividly of him. That was my reason."

"Thank you. Now, I've seen Beldridge; he'll take a lot of doing. But am I wrong in thinking that you're connected with this thing, more than Cavendeen would admit?"

"You are right," she said quietly.

"Beldridge tells me that Chosan is defunct, bombed out of existence."

"Yes." Her voice told how the words hurt. "It was a huge organization. My father was at its head. He and my brother were both killed; I'm alone. The corporation has been torn apart and entirely dismembered by treachery and enmity; it has ceased to exist. I'm here, trying to save what I can out of the wreckage. It's very dangerous; I'm unable to do much."

"Hello! That puts a different light on everything!" Hardesty exclaimed. "Confound that clam of a Cavendeen! Well, I must talk fast. You and he have mentioned danger; not in any literal sense, I take it?"

She leaned forward. "Yes, yes, terribly so!" Her voice, her eyes, were earnest. "There are people, like nations, who feed on the misfortunes of others, who seize whatever can be seized, who deny all the virtues that made up the world and would erect upon its ruins a new order dedicated to materialism and greed. These people, like these nations, cannot endure, but they must be fought lest they drag us and the earth down to their own brute level. Yes, it is frightfully dan-

No one was visible; he dragged Morlan into the apartment.

Illustrated by Frederic Anderson

"We mean to have your signature at all costs, Miss Negli.... Tighter, Ito!"

gerous! Don't you think that you or I, or both of us, would be ruthlessly murdered for three hundred thousand dollars? And there's more, far more than this, at stake! Oh, I'm sorry I'm the cause of you running this risk—"

"Forget it; I'm not sorry," cut in Hardesty. "Now, I've traced Beldridge to a Jap business concern, the Tanahi Trading Company. I believe he acts as undercover man for such people here. What's the matter?"

She caught her breath sharply.

"Oh! They're the very ones—don't you know how they've smashed and broken everything economic in China? Like the Chosan Corporation. I've been warned; they'll stop at nothing if they learn what I'm doing, what you're doing! They encourage treachery and enmity and murder; they, here in this country, feel above the law, and they hate us and fear us.... They hate me; they'll kill me if they find me!"

Agitation filled her voice; color suffused her features. They were exquisite features, thought Hardesty. Was she Chinese, Eurasian, Caucasian? He did not know or care. He had spoken impulsively—old lovely silk and moongleams on distant water —and it fitted her.

She glanced at the clock by the cigar-stand and rose, extending her hand.

"I must go, I must go!" she exclaimed. "Don't come with me. . . . I shall leave here today or tomorrow. It is too dangerous. Good-by for this time. Be careful, I implore you! I've tried to make you realize the danger."

She turned and was gone, hastily, leaving Hardesty staring after her.

What strange agitation! She was not a person to be easily frightened or flung off poise. Her words had cleared things up for him, yet there must be much more left unsaid. His disclosure about Beldridge had startled her terribly, for some reason. So she was all that remained of the Chosan Corporation—salvaging what she could, eh?

She disappeared within the taxicab elevator. Hardesty turned and picked up his forgotten hat. As he stooped, he saw the yellow slip lying beside the divan; it must have fallen from her lap as she rose in her agitation. Picking it up, Hardesty strode swiftly to the elevators. He was taken down and came out to the taxicab landing. Too late! He turned to the starter.

"I was looking for the lady who just came down—she dropped something."

"The one who went to Harrowdean Mansions, sir? She was off just ahead of you."

"Very well, thanks. I'll take a cab."

He went home; evidently she had remembered the address.

IN his own quarters, he settled down to rearrange his mental chessmen. Her few words had given him a clear picture at last, as far as it went. There was no longer any mystery as to the secret of her interest in him.

He attempted to be practical-minded, to regard her dispassionately. She must have spent much of her life in Asia, she must have seen horrible things; they were commonplace these days, everywhere but here in America. Now she was here, trying to scrape up the fragments of her family's broken fortunes, but harsh memories rode her; she fancied dangers everywhere, she was given over to illusions, to delusions of persecution.

"The hell with it! All that's just not so!" Hardesty growled abruptly. "It sounds good, but it's piffle. She's clear-headed, clear-sighted. I can see why Cavendeen kept mum; he knew I wouldn't believe the truth. It sounded too fantastic to him, maybe. If she says there's danger, she knows what she's talking about. Come to think of it, that guy Beldridge is playing a pretty risky game himself. He's hard as nails, too; I wouldn't put anything past him."

Hardesty spent most of the afternoon downtown, trying to get information on the Tanahi Trading Company, with small luck. All he could learn was that it handled a general brokerage business. When he returned home, he found that a man had been here twice to see him, leaving no name. He chucked his hat away, slumped into a chair, and picked up the telegram Miss Negli had lost. And this time he put aside his scruples and read it.

He knew Harrowdean Mansions well, had once lived there himself; it was a mammoth block of apartments overlooking the East River, for moderate incomes. A showy exterior, and inside, a regular rabbit-warren of small and large quarters. He crumpled the telegram and tossed it into a waste-basket. Nearly five o'clock.

His bell rang. He opened the door to a slim, smiling man, nattily dressed; a young man with wide cheek-bones and vivid black eyes and flashing teeth.

"Mr. Hardesty? My name is Morlan, Ezra J. Morlan. I've been here twice and missed you. I was sent to you by Mr. John Cavendeen, of Cavendeen & Carver."

"Come in." Hardesty shook hands. "Glad to meet you. Have a chair."

Morlan complied; he had an amiable, free-and-easy manner.

"I'VE just arrived in New York," he said, "from Hongkong, and have brought with me a good many of Chosan Corporation's papers that have been located since the bombing. Some of these bear upon Beldridge, in whom Cavendeen said you are interested."

"Yes," rejoined Hardesty. He did not entirely fancy his visitor.

"He suggested that you take such as you might want to have; I'm turning the lot over to Cavendeen in the morning. Would you care to see them?"

"Of course! Have you brought them with you?"

Morlan laughed. "Hardly; it's quite a quantity. However, if you'd care to look over them, we might take a taxi to my quarters. Afterward, perhaps you'd have dinner with me; I have some information on Beldridge myself, which is at your disposal."

"Fine!" Hardesty dismissed his doubts; it takes all sorts of men to make a world. "I'm ready now, if you are. Were you connected with the corporation?"

"Yes. I was the Seattle agent. Beldridge, the head agent, was located in San Francisco." Morlan stood up. "A rather remarkable chap, Beldridge."

"He must be," said Hardesty dryly.

This arrival, this sudden source of information, excited him; just when he had reached a dead end, here was an upthrust of hope! As they sought the street, Morlan talked freely. His knowledge of Beldridge was thorough; he had at one time been the man's assistant. Hardesty hailed a passing taxi to the curb, and they got in.

"Where to?" demanded the driver.

"Harrowdean Mansions," said Morlan. "The main entrance."

The words hit Hardesty like a blow in the face.

"How'd you happen to strike that place?" he forced himself to say. "I used to live there a couple of years ago."

"It was recommended to me by Cavendeen," Morlan replied. "I'll be here for some time, and it's less expensive than a hotel."

Hardesty scarcely heard; his pulses were throbbing, his brain was leaping —danger, she had said! And a telegram had called her there suddenly!

It came to him in a flash.

"What's your apartment there?" he asked, trying to make his voice calm. "I used to have one of those places overlooking the river, from the terrace."

Morlan drew a key from his pocket and glanced at it. As though a man would forget his own room number! Hardesty was certain, even before he heard the reply:

"Mine's on a court; it's yes, 421 B, that's it."

Hardesty relaxed; stupefaction held him immobile, incredulous. Why, it was a trap and nothing else—a trap! The same number mentioned in the telegram; Miss Negli had been decoyed there, now they wanted to snare him. He remembered Beldridge had noted down his address. But why?

"They'll kill me if they find me!" Her words leaped across his mind. Impossible to credit them; mere senseless murder was too risky, too implausible. But at least it was a trap; no doubt of that!

Harrowdean Mansions loomed ahead; the taxi halted at the main entrance. Hardesty could decide on nothing, yet he must do something before he walked into 421 B. . . . Summon help? Absurd; he could prove nothing. Miss Negli might not be here now. Confused, he accompanied Morlan inside; they went to the elevator, the door clanged upon them. The car shot up; the door opened; they stepped out.

The little hallway was small and narrow, giving upon three apartments. At the end was a table of metal and imitation onyx beneath the light.

Ezra Morlan took out his key and was at the center door when Hardesty spoke.

"Wait! One thing, Morlan—what's your connection with the Tanahi Trading Company?"

Morton swung around, his eyes wide with startled surmise, an indescribable expression on his face—a look of sudden leaping ferocity. Hardesty, balanced, struck out and put his weight into the blow. Morlan fell sidewise and lost balance, a choking cry on his lips; he fell, his head struck against the metal table. After the crash, he lay senseless.

Everything risked now—play it out! Hardesty swooped on him, caught up the fallen key, and went to door B. He inserted the key, gently opened the door; he heard nothing. A light was in the hall, inside, but no one was visible. He went back to Morlan, lifted him, dragged him across the floor and into the apartment hallway, and closed the outer door.

He knew the lay of the land here; a large living-room at hand; behind it, dining- and breakfast-room with kitchen beyond; behind the kitchen, one or perhaps two bedrooms. He went to the living-room door, opened it, found the room dark except for light that came through the curtains. These cut off the dining-room.

A voice reached him:

"Put the pen closer, Ito. We must try again."

Beldridge's voice! Beldridge was within reach of him! Everything was desperately sure now; he had made no mistake. He went back to Morlan and carefully dragged him into the living-room, then searched him.

Here was the thing he would have felt in another moment or two—a long, slender, supple persuader of leather and whalebone, a slung-shot, beautiful and deadly. How the name of Tanahi had startled Morlan! He laughed softly at the thought. The man was safe enough now; that metal table had cut his skull, and he would stay out for a time.

He lifted his head, startled by a low groan. Then he heard Beldridge's voice again.

"As you probably assume, there are extremities to which we won't go, in your case. But young Hardesty will be here shortly, and when he sits in your place, you'll look on while he gets some proper handling. He needs it, too. Climax Steel—clever fellow, isn't he? But that settled his hash, I can tell you."

Hardesty came erect; recollection of Miss Negli rushed through his brain, and he went to the curtains. These were of very heavy material; as he parted them slightly, he heard a groaning, inchoate sound of torment —then he froze as he looked.

IN the room beyond were three people. Beldridge sat at a table; opposite him was Miss Negli, but for an instant Hardesty scarcely recognized her. She sat twisted in a large chair; she was tied in it. Her face, framed in masses of black hair, was distorted and flushed. An object protruding from her mouth and held by adhesive tape to her cheeks, was evidently some sort of gag. Behind her stood an impassive, brown, slant-eyed man, a Japanese, holding a cord that passed about her forehead; her arms and shoulders were bare.

On the table before her was a pen in its holder, with a number of opened documents.

Eight Are The Gates

"ANNA FEROVNA, daughter of a Russian chemist, born in Harbin, 1923. Employed by Chosan 1937-40. Clever, amoral, extremely dangerous; speaks Chinese and other languages fluently. May be found nightly at Harry's Cafe in New Orleans. Haste is advised. European agents are keenly interested in the steel-hardening formula." Here begins the second story in this series—in our forthcoming November issue.

"You are very foolish to resist," said Beldridge's harsh tones. "These negotiable bonds total nearly four hundred thousand dollars in value; you can well imagine that we're not going to balance a little unpleasantness, or even life itself, against such a sum. They're of no use to anyone without your signature. A little tighter, Ito; carefully."

The Japanese twisted the cord that bound the girl's forehead. Her eyes distended; that low, gasping groan escaped her once more. Beldridge went on calmly:

"Without your signature, as treasurer of the defunct Chosan Corporation, they're worthless; we mean to have your signature, Miss Negli, at all costs. They have been kept for such an occasion as this. We knew you would show up sooner or later. Now that we've found you— Tighter, Ito; the cord hasn't cut the skin yet. When Hardesty arrives, we'll put fire under his feet, Indian fashion. You'll watch him roast until—"

Ito tightened the cord. The bulging eyes of the girl rolled wildly; a frightful sound came from her lips. As the cord loosened, she nodded violently.

"Ah! Good," said Beldridge. "Your right arm is free below the elbow. Sign."

All this while Hardesty had stood paralyzed with the horror of realization; now he wakened, controlled his frantic impulse to intervene, and watched, desperately alert. The torment was ended, the cord was removed. With the pen in her right hand, she was signing the bonds as Ito indicated to her. Beldridge, putting a cigarette to his lips, smiled.

"You're wise; it's taken a lot of persuading, but I knew you'd come around. I might mention that your friend Ivan won't show up, ever; he died suddenly on his way here, I understand. What is it? No; write it, don't try to say it."

THE girl had looked up at him, was trying to convey something. Ito slid a scrap of paper under her pen, and she wrote.

Beldridge reached over for it, read it, and chuckled.

"Leave Hardesty alone? No, no, young lady; he'll have to learn his lesson. When he gets out of the hospital he won't bother us again. All signed, Ito? Good. Tie down her hand again. You know, Miss Negli, we're not through with you yet; in fact, this is only a beginning. I've undertaken to produce you whenever your services are required. You'll be kept here; we have a very capable woman coming to look after you. . . Just a moment, Ito!"

He looked up sharply, his dark, vulpine features in a snarl. Ito, who had been folding the bonds and gathering them into a briefcase that lay on the table, paused.

"Don't try to slide off with those bonds," rasped Beldridge, "until I get paid. You brought the money with you; hand it over! Fifty thousand, my lad, or leave the bonds."

"Oah, yes! Excuse, please, excuse!" said Ito, smiling widely. He reached into his pocket and drew out a thick sealed packet, and handed it over with a bob of his cropped head.

Beldridge tore at it with eager slashing fingers to expose crisp new banknotes. Hardesty, watching, found it hard to realize that on this table was such a fortune as few men have seen at one time. He stood irresolute, awaiting some clue to action. He was unarmed, except for the persuader.

"All right, off with you!" said Beldridge. "I'll take care of her till the woman comes. If you meet Morlan bringing Hardesty, on your way out, give me a ring from downstairs."

The Japanese smiled, bobbed his head again, caught up a chauffeur's cap and started for the curtains. Hardesty stepped back; he was still horrified by the blank, frightful stare in the tortured face of the girl.

Briefcase under arm, Ito came into the darkened living-room; the open door from the hall threw in a shaft of light.

BELDRIDGE puffed at his cigarette and grinned at the staring, silent girl. At a thick, dull sound, he jerked up his head, eyes speculative, then came the slam of the apartment door closing, and he relaxed. One hand went out, fingering the packet of banknotes. Besides these, his other hand laid down an automatic pistol; he weighted the banknotes with it.

"I was ready for that Jap, y'know," he observed. "One can never tell about these brown rascals. So you don't want Hardesty touched, eh? Sorry we can't accommodate you."

Hardesty came through the curtains and straight for him.

Beldridge sprang to his feet. He reached out for the automatic—he had it; but before he could throw off the safety-clasp, the deadly supple slung-shot cracked down on his wrist. A cry of frantic agony burst from him; his hand dangled. Hardesty struck him again and again, silent, cruelly efficient, remorseless; the man crumpled into the chair and slumped forward on the table, face-down.

Hardesty swung around. Miss Negli was sagging in her chair, chin on breast. She had fainted.

Darting to her, he carefully drew the adhesive tape from her cheeks, released a metal pear-gag from her mouth, and freed her from the chair. There was no time to waste. He hurried through the kitchen, switched on the bedroom lights, found her dress and hat and brought them back, piling them on the table.

He lifted her head again. Her eyes came open; a low, shuddering breath escaped her. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth. He wiped it away, gently.

"It's all right; take it easy, now. Here are your things; get into them, for we'll have to move fast. Can you manage by yourself?"

SHE smiled faintly. Words came painfully, fateringly:

"Yes. A dream—you! I owe you everything. . . . 'Eight are the gates,' and—and—"

"Don't try to talk. The bonds and Beldridge's cash go to Cavendeen. We're making the Tanahi crowd pay heavily for this job. No time to talk now. Get ready."

He helped her to stand, then turned from her to the table. He slipped the automatic into his pocket and after it the thick pad of banknotes. Bringing out his notation of the claim against Beldridge, he caught up the ready pen and wrote rapidly on it:

"Settled in full. J. Hardesty, agent for Chosan Corp."

Beldridge's unbroken hand lay inert upon the table; Hardesty lifted it, put the paper under it, and let it fall again. He looked up to find Miss Negli getting into her coat, and sprang to help her.

"Good! Come along, now."

He guided her through the obscure living-room, past the half-glimpsed shapes of Ito and Ezra J. Morlan, out into the hall and on to the elevator, the door closing behind them. They descended, walked out, found a waiting taxi. Hardesty directed the driver to her hotel.

"I'll drop you there," he said cheerfully. "Able to walk all right, or shall I come in?"

"I'm all right," she responded in a low voice.

"I'll give you a call later to make sure, then. And one of these days, you'll have to tell me the rest of that quotation about the gates. . . . That mark on your forehead will go away in no time; don't worry about it."

In the flash from street-lights, he met her eyes, fastened upon him; their expression startled him. For an instant, her fingers touched his hand.

"I'm not worried. Yes, I shall tell you one day, perhaps; not now," she said. "How did you find me?"

He told her. She made no comment. At the corner by her hotel, she refused to let him come farther; another faint touch of her hand, and she was gone. . . . When, an hour later, Hardesty telephoned her, he was told that she had checked out, leaving no forwarding address.

MADAME HEX

He had knocked out twenty-three guys, and he had a girl named Precious, and then—a medium introduced him to the spirit of John L. Sullivan.

By SAMUEL TAYLOR

I AND the Prof were waiting for Madducks to show up, and it was getting along about eight P. M. in the evening, and the Prof said to me: "Flame, old pal, we have seen a lot together and nothing can take away the memory of those precious months we roomed together at San Quentin. I have been proud to know you for a man of principle and brains. You have never let sentiment interfere with business, and I have often said you were one of the slickest crooks who ever stole his grandmother's gold teeth while she slept."

"Thank you," I said, touched.

"And that is why I am now hurt," the Prof went on, "to see old Jimmy Flame gone feeble in the head."

"You no doubt refer to Madducks?" I said.

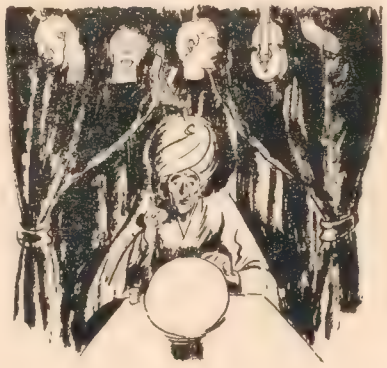
"No doubt."

"You have not seen Madducks."

The Prof shook his head sadly.

"If he is screwy enough to fall for this, I do not wish to see Madducks."

We were seated, I and the Prof, in the latter's parlor, which room was hung with black drapes all around the walls. The Prof had his robe and turban on, and sitting at the little table holding the crystal ball, was idly manipulating controls which caused plaster hands, faces, musical instruments and other items to appear from the drapes and float across the room. The overhead light of course destroyed the effect, for the wires could be seen.



"Enter!" the Prof called hollowly.

I said: "Prof, I have a deal on which—confidentially—I expect to put me on Easy Street within a month. And of course with this and that I'm always picking up a couple thousand here and there—cigarette-money. However, to be painfully frank, at the present moment I have just enough to finance a cup of coffee and a five-cent cigar. And does the smell of onions in this joint denote you're doing a little cooking behind the drapes to keep the body and soul together?"

"Ah, me," the Prof sighed, and then there was a knock at the door.

The Prof switched off the overhead light and caused a plaster hand to scuttle out of sight. I slipped behind the black drapes and drew a fat sock full of moist sand from my hip pocket. A little light was on beneath the crystal ball, and the Prof sat there in his turban and robes with the faint glow from the little light throwing shadows upward on his face.

"Enter!" he called hollowly, and Madducks came in.

The Prof blinked. Madducks was nobody to meet in a dim light. There was too much wrist hanging out of his sleeves and not enough white space between the eyes and the bushy black hair. Madducks was scratching nervously at a kneecap without stooping. But he was breathing like a hand-saw in knotty pine. He was scared.

"I—come for help," he gulped.

"I don't know," the Prof intoned. "There are powers against me. I feel them."

"I told Flame it wasn't no use, when he said to come and see you," Madducks mumbled. "I wouldn't of got mixed up with Flame in the first place, except nobody else would touch me since I got hexed. Everybody knows Flame is a dirty crook."

Hearing these reflections on my character, I gripped the sock of sand tighter, and waited behind the drapes.

"Perhaps," the Prof said, "you're an unbeliever."

"No, I aint. There's plenty of things science don't know nothing about," Madducks said darkly. "And I know what happened to me. I was plowing for fall wheat one day, and I got the call. I unhitched the horses and went in the house and said to the folks: 'I'm going to be a prize-fighter. I'm going to be champion of the world.' Science can't explain anything like that."

"Quite right," the Prof admitted.

"So I started in fighting, and after a while I got the hang of it and I knocked out twenty-three guys in a row, and by that time I had me a manager and some money and my girl Precious, and I'd set up her brother George in the radio business And I knew I'd be champ, on account I had the call. Then I got matched with the Welshman, and they pulled a hexer on me.

"From now on, we'll keep it in the family," Precious said. "My brother George is going to manage Honey."

"I wasn't nervous, see. I knowed I could whip any man in the world. This hexer had big eyes, and he kept gawping at me, but he didn't bother me none, see. I never thought nothing about it, see, but every time I'd look at him, there he'd be gawping. . . I aint no fool, Professor. There was a Jensen girl back home, and she could put her hands flat on top of a table and lift it up. Then there was Old Woman Cruthers over the hill, and she could take off warts or cure toothache with a charm, and she could mix up a batch of love-philter that never missed Some things the scientists don't know nothing about. . . .

"Anyhow, I was fighting the Welshman, and when I'd glance over to ringside, this hexer would be putting the spell on me. I wasn't worried none, see, but in the fifth round I glanced over at the hexer, and the next thing I knew they were throwing water on me in the dressing-room and the fight was over.

"Since then it's just been one hexer after another," Madducks went on. "Until nobody will touch me except a crook like Jimmy Flame. I've tried every way to get unhexed, but nobody can't help me. I even tried—"

"Sh-h-h!" the Prof hissed. "I feel something!"

I watched through a slit in the drapes while the Prof put on his act. It wasn't bad. When the props started floating by, Madducks' mouth came open. He shut it, and you could hear his teeth rattling. Then the Prof started talking without moving his lips, the way he'd learned in prison.

"I want to help you, Madducks. Can you hear me? I want to help you. Can you hear me?"

ALTHOUGH Madducks' neck bobbled, no sound came.

"Madducks, you are a great fighter. The greatest since my time. . . . You are me, Madducks. You have my body. You are me. I sent you the call. You are me. You will be champ, Madducks. I will help. I will keep the hex off you. So long as you believe, I will help. Do you know who I am, Madducks? Do you know?"

Madducks tried again to answer.

"Madducks, listen. You are me. You have my body. Madducks, I am John L. Sullivan!"

And then the Prof jumped up and started for the poor gorilla. The Prof didn't hardly come past Madducks' shoulder, and he was skinny to boot, but as he advanced, Madducks jumped up and stumbled backward.

"You doubt!" the Prof was crying. "You do not believe! You want a sign! I will give you a sign. I am John L. Sullivan!"

Madducks was trying to protest his belief, but he couldn't make a sound. He kept retreating until he was against the drapes, and the back of his head wasn't six inches from me.

"You want a sign!" cried the Prof, and he led a feeble right that wouldn't have dented a paper bag. At this instant I put weight on that sock of moist sand. . . . Madducks was out for ten minutes.

THAT it was crude, I would be the last to deny; but to coin a phrase, cut your goods to fit the pattern.

The acid test was the next couple fights. Financed by a gentleman who fell for the old lost-wallet gag, I took Madducks 'way out to the fringe of the sticks and put him in the ring with a tanker named Evans, who had his orders.

The Prof sat at the ringside with his turban and ball. The brawl had an odor, even for the far sticks. Madducks was scared to death. Evans hung his chin out like a diaper on a clothesline, and finally in the fourth frame Madducks managed to touch it and Evans took a dive. Madducks opened up a bit on the next fight; and after three more tankers took orders, he was his old self. So we brought him back to civilization and began cleaning up. Of course some of the boys tried to ring hexers on him, but Madducks was convinced he couldn't lose so long as the Prof was at the ringside keeping an open connection with John L. Sullivan.

One thing helped us. Madducks was the greatest natural fighter who ever stepped into a ring. He wasn't flashy. He wasn't fancy. But he was quick as a cat, and he could toss either fist through a reinforced concrete wall.

There were eight lovely months before Precious began flying into the ointment.

"YOU are," she advised me one night, "a low-down dirty crook."

Precious was not the most beautiful girl in the world, though that was not for me to judge if Madducks thought she controlled the rising of the sun. Personally, I do not admire the masterful type.

We three had just returned from a road trip, and Madducks had gone to see her. I and the Prof were just relaxing in the hotel with a fifth of rye when she and her brother George and Madducks arrived, and she gave me this fond greeting.

"And after all I've done," I said sadly. "After I've worked and slaved and risked my own capital!"

"Fiddlesticks!" Precious sneered. "Look at the suits you two are wearing. Look at the diamond on your finger. Look at that big car you drive. And what has Honey got out of it?" She turned on Madducks. "What have you got out of it, Honey?"

Madducks dug a big toe in the thick carpet.

"Experience," I suggested. "I'm building him up to be champ."

"You want a sign!" cried the Prof.

"He gets the experience, and you get the profit," Precious said. "But not any more. From now on, we'll keep it in the family. George is going to manage Honey."

The Prof coughed three fingers of rye upon the air.

"You can't do that to us!"

"Yes, I can! You haven't a scrap of paper to hold him!"

"A gentlemen's agreement," I murmured in a hurt voice. Madducks kept digging his toe in the carpet.

"Gentlemen's agreement!" Precious cried. "Why, Honey told me the reason he didn't write me oftener was because you wouldn't give him even stamp-money!"

"You'll never get a fight for him," the Prof gulped.

"My Uncle Amos owns the Bluebird arena," Precious said. "And anyway, they'll come to us for fights. . . . Honey, tell these crooks good-by."

Madducks gulped. "Good-by," he mumbled.

"Come on," said brother George, and they went out.

The Prof looked at me bleakly. "I told you we should of had a contract," he said.

"A contract," I pointed out, "is only for dishonest men. And anyhow, the law regulates a manager's share. There is no law to prevent a fighter donating everything to an informal associate."

"But he's going to be champ!" the Prof bleated. "You took it all, and now where are you?"

I poured a shot of rye. "It couldn't be better," I said, and I went out to see a guy named Hymie.

WHEN Madducks was matched with a guy named Hogan,—commonly called Hammerhead,—I liquidated my every asset and placed it here and there quietly on Hammerhead to win by a kayo before the sixth round. The odds I got were scandalous. Hammerhead definitely was a has-been, and Madducks had been going like lightning. The match was practically laughed off the sports-pages. The bout was held in the Bluebird, and there were plenty of empty seats.

I kept out of sight during the first round. Madducks was nervous. He kept looking to the ringside seat where the Prof always had been with his turban and ball. But he warmed up in a minute or so and had Hammerhead groggy.

When the bell rang, I rushed up to the platform.

"Get away," George told me.

"Can't I just wish him luck?" I asked plaintively. The water-bottle was there, and I put my hand on it and dropped a white pill down the neck as I looked up at Madducks. "Good luck, kid," I said. "No hard feelings."

"Thanks," he said. He was sitting there being fanned, and he still was feeling so ashamed he couldn't meet my eye.

"There's a guy in the second row named Hymie, in dark glasses," I said. "He's a hexer. When he takes off his glasses—"

"Get away!" George advised, and I lit on all fours. When I picked myself up, I saw Madducks gulping a drink, and I went out to collect.

Madducks called next morning, and dug his toe in the rug. "I been a fool," he gulped. "I been a damn' fool. That Hymie took off his dark glasses, and I went to pieces the second round."

"Let bygones be bygones," I stated. "Have you quit Precious?"

He shook his bushy head. "I—I couldn't do that. But she agreed not to interfere with my fighting any more. I want to be champ."

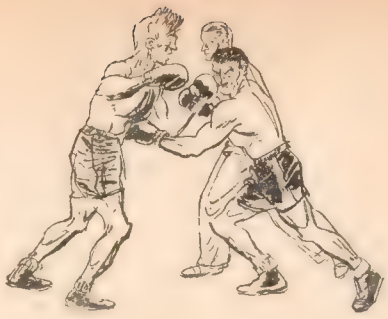
I put my hand on his shoulder.

Madducks was convinced that he couldn't lose.

"That's the stuff! You stick with me, and you'll be champ! But in a way, she was right," I admitted. "From now on, I'll see to it that you have enough stamps to write her every day you're on the road."

MADDUCKS knocked out twelve of the next fourteen boys he went up against, and then I got a return match with the Welshman, the guy who had hexed him in the first place. The Welshman had slipped a bit in the meantime, but he was still a tough trial-horse

I moved Madducks onto a farm for the training ballyhoo, and suckers paid two bits a head to get inside the barn and watch him sweat. But maybe it was worth it. Madducks was pretty. He was beautiful, as a fighting machine. As I saw him in his last workout before the fight, he could have licked any man in the world.



"He is sweet," the Prof said that evening as we relaxed with a fifth of rye in the old farmhouse. "He is sweet. It is too bad he's got to lose to the Welshman."

"A shame," I agreed sadly. "A dirty shame. But five will get you fifteen, on the Welshman, and they fight for the five."

"How much we got on the Welshman?"

I reproved him with a glance. A man doesn't talk about that!

He started counting up for himself on his fingers, and when he ran out of fingers he grinned fondly.

"Anyhow," he said, "the champ's afraid of him. Madducks can lose to the Welshman this time, then win a re-match, and the champ won't be afraid of him."

"That smacks of rationalization, but it's true," I agreed. "And, anyhow, we are not in any hurry to make Madducks champ. That is his life's ambition, and we don't want him to lose his zest for life too soon. Precious has been too grimly silent of late, as if she is only waiting until he becomes champ."

The Prof shivered. "Flame, what if he don't lose? You can't dope his water this time. This is a big fight—well, pretty big—but too big for that stuff. There'll be newspapermen and radio experts six deep around the ring. If there's anything funny about the way Madducks folds up—"

"Professor!" I reproved. "An accusation like that, coming from you! Don't worry, there won't be nothing funny. This Welshman is trying his old hex gag again, and that'll be enough, when you don't show up with the turban and crystal ball. Madducks has got to have John L. Sullivan whispering in his ear. He won't forget what a third-rater like Hammerhead Hogan did to him when you weren't there. Don't worry."

"But all our dough, Flame—every dime—"

"Folded three times on the Welshman," I agreed cheerfully.

SO it came the night of the big fight. For sentimental reasons and because he made a better price, Precious'

Uncle Amos was promoting the battle. Uncle Amos had leased the ball-park, put up a ring and bleachers and lights. Of course the Prof was a well-known figure in the sports pages long since, and this angle, coupled with Madducks' record and the fact that the Welshman previously had hexed and licked him, made for a sell-out. Naturally the boxing commission took no official notice of the hex angle. I and the Prof had been called in for an informal chat, and after hearing our

story the commission laughed gayly and bid us adieu.

So the prelims were run off and everybody was happy. And the time came for the main event. The Welshman came into the ring and the mob yelled for Madducks. But Madducks was not happy. He would not leave the dressing-room under the grandstand.

"He aint showed up," he said. "He aint showed up. I can't fight without the Prof."

I took a deep breath and put a hand on his shoulder. "Madducks, my boy," I said sadly, "I guess I better tell you."

"W-what?" He was white, and scared as a kid in a graveyard full of snakes.

"Not mentioning any names," I said, glancing at Precious, "I believe the Prof has been kidnaped. There are those close to you who would do that."

"That Welshman!" cried Madducks. "That dirty Welshman!"

"No!" Precious piped up. "I kidnaped the Prof!"

This jolted me like a shot of twenty-year-old brandy—a nice, sublime shock almost too good to believe.

Madducks blinked at her unbelievingly. "Y-you—"

"I kidnaped the Prof," Precious said in that masterful way she had. "I had George do it."

"Precious!" It was a bleat.

"Don't be a fool, Honey!" Precious snapped. "It's common gossip that the Prof helps you somehow. How long do you think it will be before somebody besides me gets the idea to detain him during a fight? You can't expect to go on to the championship with a crazy situation like that. You've got to find out tonight, once and for all, that you don't need him."

Madducks looked piteously at me. I shrugged.

"You're the one picked your friends," I told him. "Not wanting to enter a family quarrel, but I just want to point out that sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will never harm you. She's been calling *me* a crook!" Meanwhile, I was sticking my tongue in my cheek and shaking hands with myself. What a break! Precious had sent George to kidnap the Prof on the very night that he wasn't due to show up!

"Go out and fight," Precious said, shoving Madducks through the door. And to the seconds: "Don't let anybody slip anything in that water-bottle." Then she grabbed me and said, "Just a minute!"

"Under the circumstances—"

"Just a minute," she repeated, and kicked the door shut behind the seconds. We were alone. "Now you listen to me, you crook! I know all about everything. I've been keeping my mouth shut and my eyes open lately. George was listening at the window the other night while you and the Prof talked about throwing this fight and betting on the Welshman. And he heard about that doped water-bottle in the fight with Hammerhead Hogan."

"George," I observed, "is a gem of a brother."

"And that's why I said I'd kidnaped the Prof," she said. "Because when Honey wins tonight, he'll know who's responsible. You dirty two-bit crook! You with your big car and your diamonds—and he doesn't even have a decent suit to wear!"

"Fortunately we are alone," I pointed out. "So the libel laws can't touch you."

"All right, get out of here. But keep away from our corner. Uncle Amos has two men who'll toss you out if you try to so much as speak to Honey."

"What a family!" I sighed, and went out grinning.

AT the bell the Welshman came out cautiously. He generally took a beating; he expected it. But he could hand out punishment, and he loved that. He had a flat nose and his left ear was shriveled into a little wrinkled doornob. There were white scar-lines around his eyebrows and mouth and his prominent cheekbones. Madducks came out fast as if in desperation and climbed all over the Welshman. He was a champion. Precious was on her feet at the ringside, yelling exultantly but making no drop of sound in the river of the mob's yowl. The Welshman covered up, got in a couple of rabbit punches at each clinch and some gouges with the heel of the hand on the breakaways. Otherwise it was all Madducks the first round, and the second and the third. But me, I was gnawing complacently on my two-bit cigar by the end of the fourth frame The crowd thought Madducks was eating the Welshman up. They kept thinking that during the fifth and sixth They began catching on in the seventh, and by the eighth even the peanut-hawkers knew that Madducks was freezing up.

The Welshman became cautious, puzzled, as Madducks froze. But when the old warrior was satisfied it wasn't a ruse, he began opening up. Madducks was no longer using his speed and power. His confidence was gone, and he wasn't using anything. He went down for a short count in the eighth, and during the rest period he looked pleadingly at Precious, while the seconds manhandled him. The girl's jaw was chalky now. She was scared. But she didn't soften.

"You can do it!" she called up at him. "You've got to, Honey! I'd as soon see you whipped, as eaten by vultures!"

In the ninth the Welshman was smelling victory, and eager for it. He smashed a dozen torso blows that painted a great pink splotch over Madducks' heart. He was numbing the youngster's insides, draining him dry, smashing the fight and the heart out of him, preparing for the kill. Madducks had to be led to the corner at the bell. He'd taken it a whole round—just stood there and absorbed it. What a fighter!

But he was still groggy after the rest period, and he wobbled out at the bell. The Welshman came out roaring, slammed a couple at that pink torso splotch to make sure, then uncorked a roundhouse right to the jaw. Madducks went down slowly. He had a champion's ability to take it. The Welshman hit him twice before his knees touched the mat. Madducks went over forward and lay writhing, trying to get up. What a man! To-

night he didn't have a heart, but he still had the something that makes a champ. He was trying to get up.

"Stay down, you fool!" I yelled. I had to take a swipe at my eyes, and I haven't bawled in thirty years. "Stay down, boy! Don't take any more!"

The mob's voice died, and I could hear the radio announcer counting the swinging arm of the referee. The mob was holding its breath. The count was *four, five, six, seven,* with the referee's white sleeve striking down like a sword hacking away Madducks' chances. It was *seven,* and I was three seconds from more money than I dared count.

Then Madducks came up.

IT wasn't possible, after what he'd taken. He wasn't himself. It was unnatural. I swiped at my eyes again to make sure I wasn't seeing things Madducks was up. Groggy, lurching, numbed—he still had an electric something, a vital overtone of movement.

"Stop the fight!" I yelled, and somehow I was afraid. Something about Madducks made me afraid. "Stop the fight! My boy's out on his feet! Throw in the towel!"

"Shut up, you," a big guy growled, and his fist was in my collar. "I got orders to keep you quiet."

The Welshman roared out of the neutral corner and swung that roundhouse right to finish things off. Madducks couldn't take that. He couldn't. But he did. And somehow, he had the agility to ride the sting out of the blow. Then instead of clinching and hanging on, Madducks countered. It wasn't much of a counter, but Madducks tried. He was fighting! It was impossible. He stayed up. He even seemed stronger by the end of the round. It was a miracle. It was something you read about. It couldn't happen. Then in the next round he came out fighting. He came out with some of his old cat-speed and mule-power. I don't know how many of that mob knew what they were seeing. I tell you, after that, I could yawn at any miracle. And now—

The Welshman went down in the twelfth and was counted out. . . .

The next thing I knew I was sitting alone in the ball park; the lights were off, and the wind was cold. It was very quiet except for one small sound, and I found myself listening and trying to locate it, for no reason. Then I saw a small gleam of light at a slit of the canvas hanging from the ring platform to the ground. The sound was coming from there. I went to the ring platform and crawled under the canvas. It was tacked to the studs and I had to tear some of the tacks out.

Precious' brother George was working under there, with the aid of a small flash. There was a black box with dials on it, on the ground under the platform. A lot of wires ran out the top of the box. Each wire ended in a little black thing like an earphone, and these little black things were fastened onto the underside of the platform in a pattern that didn't leave much room between them. There must have been fifty of them fastened to the underside of that platform, held in place by suction cups. I pulled one off and looked at it.

"Leave that alone," George said.

"What is it?" I said.

"It's a little speaker—like an earphone, but with a bit more volume. Put it down, I said. And scram."

I looked around at the little speakers fastened under the planks. The mouths of the speakers were set at the joints between the planks.

"A fine how-de-do," I said. "You dirty crook!"

George said: "These dinguses made Madducks win, and if there's any squawk, you'll take it in the neck with the others. You managed him on this fight. Now, scram."

I crawled out. Precious was coming down an aisle. By the moonlight I could tell that she had been crying with happiness.

"I'm sorry, Flame," she said. "But if you'd been halfway decent— Honey won't need you any more. He's going to be champion. On his own. He's going to the top. I'm sorry you can't come along."

I laughed. "Not so fast, sister. You and George pulled a slick one, I admit. But you'll never be able to get away with it again. You won't always be in Uncle Amos' arena where you can monkey with things. And I'll see that you don't, anyhow. So that game's finished. Madducks heard something this time, when he was down and his ear was close to the mat. Whatever he heard hopped him up. But you can't pull it again. You've got to have me and the Prof for the next fight. Now, I figure you and me should ought to work together—"

"You—you poor miserable crooked thing!" Precious said sadly. "You haven't any vision at all. Honey don't need the Professor any more. Honey is his own medium. When he was down and out, it came to him, direct. The voice of John L. Sullivan. Direct! A personal message. No man ever asks a repeat performance on a miracle. Honey will be champion on his own. Good-by."

WHEN I walked out to the street, a taxi was pulling up, and the Prof got out. "He'll pay you," the Prof said to the driver, pointing at me. "It's one-sixty-five, Flame."

"Sorry, stranger," I said indulgently. "I never saw you before in my life."

"I'll pay you tomorrow," the Prof squealed as the driver climbed out.

"Sure; and here's your receipt in advance," the driver said. He led with his right. Then he climbed in and drove away, whistling.

I helped the Prof up. We walked down the street. "I got a dime," I said, and we turned into a side-arm café and ordered coffee. I pulled out two cigars, and handed one to the Prof.

"These are two-bit cigars," I reflected after a few moments of meditation, "and the coffee is good. We started out with less. And in between, we lived like dukes."

"A million bucks gone to hell!" the Prof growled.

I took another puff at my cigar.

"All right, we didn't swing it. But it's still the biggest and screwiest deal the fight game ever had tried on it. That's something. We didn't go down pikers, Prof. Who's kicking?"

Illustrated by Lyle Justis

"Stay down, you fool!" I yelled. "Stay down—don't take any more!"

Salvage Harry

THEY have a strangeness on them, and some hidden strength, those who follow the outland trails; they serve a mistress never known to common men, and her call can be a most compelling thing. Sometimes it's a puff of heady wind across an open space, a sight of sunrise after heavy gales, when the sea is green and shot with cobalt fire along the thin horizon lip. Sometimes it's nothing but the long-drawn snore of a homing ship prying the mist apart along a channel's way, its sound reaching faintly to a smoke-filled room where wanderers sit to drink and talk. One of them will lift his face to listen with his eyes a-pucker and his head a-tilt, suddenly knowing that call is meant for him. And knowing, too, that when that lady out there nods your way, you just get up and walk, that's all.

Maybe that's the way it was with Captain Harry Baintree, skipper and owner of the schooner *Pandoman*. It's more than likely by the tall, spare, solid look of him, though of course no one would ever ask a silly thing like that in the Eastern port of Menado on the northern coast of Celebes. That's where she sent him, that fickle little wench with sunshot seaclouds in her hair, the loom of ocean water in her beckoning eyes. She sent another out there too, in her slyly jesting way; a girl with russet hair and a figure men could dream about in the stillness of the middle watch. She played the violin in the dining-room of the Hôtel Continental on the southern river bank. That's where Captain Baintree first saw her, while taking Minahasa coffee and a tip of Holland gin liqueur with Willem Van der Proust, his friend the surgeon from over Government House.

She came in quietly with the fiddle in her hand, and the burghers stopped their babbling all at once, so that the punkahs creaked and rustled clearly overhead. Harry didn't notice: he was telling Van der Proust, quite calmly, of rumors of enemy raiders loose about the Sea of Celebes, with destroyers from Singapore and Australia out upon her hunt. He didn't believe any truck like that, he said. Proust made no reply, only pulling the gray tufts of his sidewhiskers. Till suddenly Harry looked up, startled. And there she was, dressed in some filmy blue stuff, with wild orchids at her breast. Then she started to play, going smilingly from table to table. In there were coffee-planters, traders from the Java Sea, grizzled gutta-percha boomers, hard-fisted skippers from the Molucca schooner fleets, their weather-beaten heads all turning to follow her. She looked so small, so slender and so straight, making lovely music in that outlandish place. Harry just sat and stared.

"Surprised? No?" Van der Proust chuckled. "She was with a troupe of players coming along from Macassar. Pallerson, the scoundrel who ran the show, skipped with all the cash. Left them high and dry. Most of them scattered after him in the Stroomen Kaap ship. One of 'em's dancing nautch in a sailor dive on the other bank. You know what that means. Not this girl. She wouldn't run away. Went to old Braunberg and told him she'd work out the guilders she owed if he'd give her half a chance. Well, he was pretty angry, but not what you'd call a fool. You see? The place is now jammed every night. Wait'll you hear her play *'Till Eulenspiegel'* to make the burghers dream about the Zuyder Zee! Hey? What do you say, Captain?"

FOR some time Harry didn't say anything. It seemed to him she was looking straight at him, the way he was at her. The music, he was sure came from her eyes and lips, not from the instrument at all. So he sat there staring, while Doctor Proust kept mumbling on. "Her name is Althea; that's all about it anyone knows. She seems to be looking for some one or something out here in Celebes."

"Of course," Harry could murmur at last. "Aren't you?" And he stood up.

Proust chuckled again, not seeing the fellow who had come swaying in through the barroom door. He was dressed in dirty whites, and it was quite plain the music annoyed his drunkenness. He lurched past two tables, complaining thickly: "What kind music y'call that for sailormen? Give us a chantey, sister. Liven up the dump!"

He swayed toward her. Harry strode quickly across, took him by the scruff of the neck and calmly tossed him out. It happened in an instant; the girl never lost a note. She just frowned, meaning to let him know she could care for all that sort of trouble that was in her way. The music bubbled and danced along to its end, a Chopin waltz. She smiled at all the applause; and when the Malay waiters started gliding across the floor, she came up to Captain Baintree.

"I'm really grateful." She ought to talk as well as play, Harry was thinking, hearing her throaty contralto. "But you shouldn't do that. There's no need."

"I enjoyed it. The music too," he added, grinning. "When do you play *'Till Eulenspiegel'*? Doctor Proust's been telling me."

The surgeon was there by now, fleshy and jovial. "You mustn't be angry, Althea," he rumbled. "It's just Captain Baintree's own uncouth way. We call him Salvage Harry. Any beachcomber or down-and-outer can find his feet in Harry's schooner *Pandoman*. He does things for them a doctor never could. What do you show them, Captain, out there where you go? He's a good man to know, Althea."

The girl looked quickly up at Baintree's weather-beaten face. "Yes," she agreed with simplicity, "I expect."

"Ask him to tell you about the pestilential holes he goes to in his *Pandoman*. He makes the Islands on the Line sound like a sight of heaven instead of tropical hell." Proust shook his large side-whiskered head sadly. "Why do you all come here?" he wanted to know. "What do you expect to find? Well, *au revoir*. I must look at a lovely fracture now. Bugis fellah busted his hip. Magnificent! Seen nothing like it before."

He bustled off, waving with one hand and comforting his whiskers with the other. Althea and Harry smiled after him. And that night he told her what the Doctor said he would. He told her what he'd learned about the Spice Islands and the Boni Gulf, and the islands in the north where the *Pandoman* often went.

BETWEEN her numbers she stood beside him on the wide veranda of the hotel. So how could he help speaking of things like that with the heady scent of her nearness on him, the river burbling below, Chinese

The story of Althea, who played a fiddle in a Dutch East Indies café, and of Captain Harry Baintree, whose ship struck a Nazi mine.

By JACLAND MARMUR

"Why did you hit him? Can't you see he's—" She broke off, on the verge of hysteria.

temple gongs across the flood, and moonlight on the roadstead out beyond where the trucks of his schooner arced gently to her moor. That's how it happened between Captain Harry Baintree and the girl called Althea, who got stranded in Menado and had courage enough to stay. . . .

All the way to Balikpapen, along the Java coasts, and through the Flores Sea he remembered the shining look of her. When he got back, she was still there. He heard the singing of her violin again, and saw her smiling at him with the light upon her russet hair. And when she was through she came to him at once, asking: "What? No drunks to toss out this time?"

He grinned. "I'll wait. Maybe I'll be lucky again."

Well, luck's a funny thing. Harry found that out, one voyage just before he sailed. She was playing a Viennese waltz, her body swaying to the captivating rhythm. Listening intently, he barely heard the barroom door swing open till the man stopped close by, weaving on unsteady feet.

"Damn' tune reminds me of home," he was growling thickly. "Got no call playin' music like that where a bunch of beachcombers can hear. Got to stop it."

He lurched against the table. Harry came slowly erect. "Come along," he said quietly.

He had hold of the fellow's elbow, urging him around. But the drunk shook him off, his eyes suddenly wild. "Althea!" he cried. "What's she—"

Captain Baintree was between him and Althea, his back to the girl. He heard a low buzz of indignation behind him. He didn't turn, just pressing the other before him—till the fellow lunged with his fist. Harry was just in time to block it; and because there was nothing else to do, he let go with his left, catching the beachcomber just under the heart. It wasn't a bad blow—just enough weight behind it to make a drunken man tractable. Then he caught the fellow under an elbow as he sagged, and started him through the barroom door. He turned his head on his shoulder for an instant. He meant to reassure Althea, the way he had before. These things never bothered her: she just kept on with her music. But this time he heard her cry out a name—wildly. It wasn't his own. *"John!"*

She was pale. The violin and bow had dropped to her sides. That was all that Harry saw before the door swung shut. Out there the buzz of indignation swelled. By the time Baintree dropped his inert burden to a rattan chair, Althea came bursting in, Van der Proust and Braunberg behind her. She rushed past him, while Harry watched in amazement. She

dropped to her knee and took that man's head in her hands. "John, John," she kept crying over and over. "I've found you. I knew I would." Then she was on her feet, her eyes blazing with anger as she faced the master of the *Pandoman*. "Why did you hit him? Can't you see he's—" She broke off, on the verge of hysteria, appealing to Doctor Proust. "Help him, Doctor. He's—"

"He'll be all right," the Doctor murmured, "once the whisky washes out."

Captain Baintree felt a good many things come tumbling in ruins about his ears. "He means that much to you?" he asked bleakly.

"Why shouldn't he? Why do you suppose I came here?" Her lips were trembling. "Salvage Harry, indeed! Why don't you get him on his feet instead of knocking him insensible? Is that—"

"Althea!" Braunberg was wringing his hands in abject desolation. "Can't you settle this quarreling later? You will ruin my place! Althea, I beg of you!"

Somehow he dragged her away. Harry knew that. He heard Braunberg's unctuous voice out there, fawning reassurance and apology, till like tremulous music coming to a ruined place, he heard the sound of a violin again. There was bitterness in his eyes. When he turned to look down at the blear-eyed man sprawled out in the chair, his voice was icy. "You're a sailor," he said flatly.

"What the hell do you care?"

"I don't. . . . What ticket?"

"Ticket?" The man in dirty drill stiffened. "Who told you—"

"I know. I've seen them before. I don't care how much red ink you got splashed on it. Or why. What is it? Mate?"

"Sure." He rubbed the stubble of beard on his chin. "John Aldrich, chief mate of the *Jacinta* when she bust her back on the Duxbury Reef!" His voice was harsh. "Seven men drowned: I saw them. If I told you it wasn't my fault, you'd laugh like hell! Wouldn't you, now? You'd have some fun! If I told you the Old Man—" He broke off, staggered erect, turned for the rattan screen at the rear of the bar. "Let me out of here. I've messed up her life enough. I—"

"Some women stick," Harry Baintree cut in grimly, "and others don't. Althea's one of the kind who does. I'm master of the schooner *Pandoman*. We sail in half an hour. You want a job?"

"Job?" John Aldrich spun on his heel. "You'd give *me* a berth?"

"Second mate. For her—not you." Harry turned toward Doctor Proust, who just stood there with his large eyes staring. "You tell her, Doctor," he said softly, "I'll bring him back on his feet—or on a plank."

"Sweat up that lugs'l" he cried.

Proust knew Harry never carried a second. The *Pandoman* was manned by Malays, officered by two whites: Baintree and his first mate Mr. Larch, the serang standing the master's watch when the weather was clear and fine. So the surgeon wanted to say something, knowing how Harry felt, knowing what Althea meant to him. But he couldn't. He didn't know the right words. He just nodded while Captain Baintree hooked Aldrich under the elbow, steering him out the rear door. Proust heard the crunch of 'rickshaw wheels before he turned away, mournfully shaking his head. The last note of Althea's violin reached him, like a thin echo of tinkling bells. And two billiard-balls from the table in Braunberg's parlor for shipmasters clicked loudly together with a fatal sound of finality. . . .

So Captain Harry Baintree took the *Pandoman* to sea with John Aldrich for a second mate. She went poking through the islands, picking up her exotic cargoes in the jungled little ports. Mahogany logs, copal, rattans, gum, and spice. John Aldrich lounged through his watches on the poop, smoking innumerable brown cigarettes. Mr. Larch was plainly scornful. "No good," the mate told his skipper with certainty. "The sap's washed out of him. If you'll forgive me, sir," he growled, "I don't for the life of me see why you bring these broken-down beachcombers into the ship at all. Aint we got troubles enough?"

He stumped off, angrily. Captain Baintree couldn't blame him. Aldrich was just dead weight. The red ink on his ticket fouled his blood. Harry began to wonder if he'd ever get it clean. That fellow with the slack jaw and the blank stare wasn't worth a girl like Althea. But some women were funny that way: they had a rule of values men couldn't understand. Meanwhile, the *Pandoman*, working north, coasted Palawan before she started running south again across the Sulu Sea. The wind was foul for Sibutu Passage. But with the brilliant green islands over the stern, there was a free run before the wind the Malays called *barat*. Who would think of trouble in a place like that? The ship ran easily with a quartering breeze, topsails set. And that's when it happened, toward dawn of a brilliant starry night with the serang and Aldrich keeping the deck.

Harry fell asleep with the sound of a fair wind keening aloft. It was the last thing he remembered before hell broke loose on board the *Pandoman*. The explosion was violent. It rocked the ship as if her whole for-

"Move, you monkeys! Move!"

ward end had blasted clear of the sea. It brought Harry tearing up the companion. When he reached the poop, he saw ruin all around, while the ocean heaved and gave no sign. The ship was settling already by the bows. He saw the foremast rocking drunkenly, canvas slatting, before it went over with a rending crash, dragging the main tophamper with it. The deck tipped crazily, planking ripped and jagged. The helmsman was spinning the wheel madly. There was a terrified shouting from forward, men racing aft in panic, and John Aldrich, standing by the taffrail with his eyes wild and staring.

"I tell you there was nothing!" he shrieked. "Nothing to see! Then a black thing in the water, like a floating log. I put the helm over, but it struck. Who knew what it was? It struck us on the bows and the whole ship went! I—"

"Shut up!" Wild thoughts raced through Baintree's mind. Ocean raiders that laid mines in these South Seas lanes, terrors like that were afloat in the sea these days and there had followed tragedies aplenty. He started across the deck. Over his head the main gaff cracked with a splitting roar. Something struck him, flung him to his knees. When he staggered to his feet, his left thigh was sticky. A stab of pain seared his side like flame when he moved. But he had no time for it. Mustn't let it blur his mind. He thought that clearly before he caught the rail and hung there, panting a little for control. Whatever it was, the ship was doomed. There was no mistaking the *Pandoman's* sodden motion in the trough. "Where's the mate? Quickly! The quarter-boat! Hook on. All hands aft here!"

He hung there. Mustn't move, he thought. If he did, agony would drown him. Where was Mr. Larch? How many had that blast killed? And what was it? Who knew, these days? All this raced past the back of his brain while he snapped orders in a quiet, self-possessed tone, as if the sheets of pain weren't slashing at him like many knives in an open wound. "Water breaker; biscuit tin! Get them out of the other boat in here. Lively, Mr. Aldrich!"

"The other boat's smashed! This one's all—"

That much he heard. It couldn't be helped. No time. The ship lurched heavily under his feet, the deck more steeply atilt. Baintree hung on, commanding the launch. He could remember it with no clarity at all. But he must have managed it. Because he found himself afloat in the quarter-boat, Aldrich beside him in the sternsheets, six Malay men on the thwarts. Mr. Larch was gone. So was the serang, the carpenter, and four others. These were all who survived. He looked up. The *Pandoman* wallowed, lifting her stern while he watched, sliding under bow-on with a furious rushing sound. In the east there was already liquid light, but between them and the horizon's edge the Sea of Celebes stretched flat and empty, blue-green with twilight. Some loose wreckage, jagged bits of timber, was all that was left of the *Pandoman.* That and an open boat. The pain rushed on Captain Baintree in red waves. Still he saw the eyes of six brown men upon him, upon the man with command in his fist. Aldrich just sat there, his head bowed and his shoulders sagging. Wouldn't do, thought Harry. Wouldn't do at all.

"Step the mast. Have the lugs'l set, Mr. Aldrich." He braced himself, because speech alone could be agony. "Can't run back to the Sulus. Dead beat to windward all the way in the monsoon." His voice flattened. "The course is east-southeast. Keep the breeze quartering. We will stand for Menado Light."

Baintree must have slipped over the edge of consciousness after that. But not for long. The thin lance of responsibility and command took no account of pain, prodding him mercilessly alert. The sun was up, a blazing copper ball in a cloudless sky. The sea was sapphire blue, running in a long swell, dark shifting shadow in between. The open boat lifted and fell, moving slowly, with the ocean gurgling close aboard. Instinctively his eyes sought the little compass-card, seeing the tiller becketed, the lugsail sheeted home. He found he had to drag himself to move properly: his left side from the waist down seemed clumsily not to belong to him at all. Aldrich had bound his leg tightly above the knee in canvas strips. He had sense enough for that, Harry thought. Then he saw Aldrich at the water breaker, passing a full pannikin of the precious stuff around. He seized the gunwale with his fist, dragged himself to a sitting posture, crying out instantly:

"Stop that! Bring that breaker under the stern thwart here!"

Aldrich lifted a haggard face. "What's the difference?" His voice was slack and lifeless. "Let 'em drink and be done. Why drag it out? We're all as good as dead!"

"Lay it aft, I said!"

They stared at each other, taut conflict between them. The Malays sat dumbly on the thwarts, wide white eyeballs on their officers, till Aldrich obeyed the command in sullen silence, taking his seat in the sternsheets again. "It's my jinx," he muttered, head on

Illustrated by Raymond Sisley

"I'll call it quits, Captain Baintree," Aldrich said. "Come on, Doc. Let's clear out."

chest. "Same as when the *Jacinta* struck. It's no good. We're all washed—"

"Stop that!" Captain Baintree's lip curled. "What ships did you serve your time in? Who taught you seafaring was as easy a wash as that? You and I are master and mate here, and we're white. These black boys are looking to us. They are in my care. So understand me! I mean to sail this boat till she takes the ground or till I'm done! After that *you'll* sail her. Till your tongue hangs out and your eyes go black!" He stopped for an instant, waiting for a wave of excruciating pain to pass. "There will be only half a pannikin of water a day and one biscuit for each man. At sunset. That's all, Mr. Aldrich. I'll take the first spell. It's your watch below."

So day passed. The open boat floated in a furnace of sunfire, lapping slowly to the south and east in an empty void of sea and sky. Captain Baintree, the tiller hooked under his arm, faced the facts and summed them up to himself. His hollow eyes blinked in a tortured, sun-scorched face. He was wondering, quite calmly, how long he could hang on. He felt fever mounting in him, crawling slowly up from his leg. Into his chest. Into his bobbing head—suffocating, blinding fever. . . . He looked sidewise toward John Aldrich.

If fever swallowed the skipper it was up to that fellow there. Wouldn't do; wouldn't do at all. The stiffening was out of him: he wanted shoring up. Well, wasn't that part of a skipper's job?

In the end, whether he was whole or whether the fever drowned him out the burden still was his. He thought of Althea, the bitterness surging on him. Then his arm suddenly stiffened on the tiller bar and his eyes took on a set and intense stare. That girl with the russet hair and the shining eyes was that man's. The fever was stumbling into Harry's brain. He knew he couldn't last for very long. He knew, too, that command was his and he had to use it to its purpose and its end by whatever means he had. He had to be sure of the second mate when he himself went out. He passed his tongue across his fevered lips.

"Mr. Aldrich!" he called sharply. "You may take over now."

The second mate started out of his doze, listlessly relieving the tiller bar. "It's no good," he mumbled. "We haven't got a chance."

Captain Baintree braced himself for what he had to do. "Maybe you're right," he agreed dully. "We ought to get things straight." Aldrich didn't stir. "You think a lot of Althea, don't you?"

"Let's leave her out! She's the only decent thing left. She—"

Baintree laughed. A short, derisive laugh. "Why the hell did you have to show up?" he said with harshness. "But you might as well know. Can't you guess? Hell, man! Before you busted in, that wench and me we had some times! She's a dainty little package, no mistake. But who do you suppose kept her in Braunberg's? Hey? Haven't you got any sense at all? We—"

"You—"

"Sure! What did you expect? And I figured if I could only get you out of the road, why—"

Aldrich leaped to his feet. The tiller swung uncharged. The smallboat yawed, flapping the lugsail wildly. The second mate swayed erect, flame-eyed, fists clenched, fury consuming him. "You filthy swine!" he roared. The Malays looked aft, bleak fright on them. And while the *Pandoman's* boat careened, a black speck in a limitless void with the blazing sun aloft and the ocean all around, John Aldrich hurled hate at his captain. "If you were whole I'd smash you in two right now! But I'll see you don't die. I won't let you die. No, by God! I'll bring you in! And when I do and you can stand again I'll thrash you to an inch of your life. By everything that's holy, Baintree!" He put the tiller bar between his knees, steadying the boat. "Sweat up that lugs'l!" he cried forward. "Move, you monkeys! Move!"

That way he steered, a grim purpose on him now. Harry Baintree thrust aside the flood of fever for long enough to see that thing. A faint, bitter smile touched the captain's cracked, dry lips. The second mate had taken charge at last. He felt the small boat urging forward, taut and helming clean. Pain wasn't so bad, knowing that. The boat, the men in his charge were on the course he set for them. For a moment longer Captain Baintree struggled against the black cloud closing in. Then the world slipped out from under and oblivion swallowed him up.

FOR Harry Baintree the rest was a nightmare. In high fever he seemed to be completely disembodied, swimming in endless seas of pain. He remembered Mr. Aldrich bending over him now and again, his face distorted with hate, telling him fiercely he wouldn't *let* him die, pressing dribbles of foul water between his lips. "Well, that's all right," Captain Bain-

tree said to himself. "Take care of the business of the sea out here, and the business of the land when it's reached." He remembered the second mate fisting down two thirst-crazed Malays with flaming eyes, and that inner part of his brain nodded approval when Mr. Aldrich lashed them to the thwarts with rope ends to keep them from going insanely overside. "That's right, Mister; that's the way it ought to be. They don't know; you do. They're just hands; you're the officer in charge and it's your job to bring them in." He had moments of disjointed memory like that.

HE had no reckoning of time. But, like seeing in a sudden blinding light, he remembered the final dawn, the second mate towering above him, sun-blackened, his eyes in haggard pockets, the tiller against his knee, the smallboat rocking in the landswell off Menado Light. And someone from the high bridge of a steamer—the K. P.M. ship coasting east from Stroomen Kaap—crying down in amazement for them to haul up and be taken aboard. And Mr. Aldrich shouting back to that astonished skipper in a thick, hoarse croak: "I sailed this boat this far myself. By myself, do you hear? By God, I'll take her in the rest of the way! Get along with your smelly tub!" . . .

This, Baintree thought, was the end. He was having hallucinations. How else could you explain the voices he heard? For that was jovial Doctor Willem Van der Proust bending over him through the fog, hopefully murmuring something about beautiful compound fractures, a sailor's resistance to gangrene, a lot of silly stuff like that. But he was in a cool place now. A girl floated in the middle space. Maybe it was a nurse. How did she manage to get to the middle of the Sea of Celebes? And her face and her figure were Althea's. There was a scent of wild blooms on her. Presently he'd be hearing the song of a violin! She'd be playing *"Till Eulenspiegel"* to make the burghers dream about the Zuyder Zee. And John Aldrich had a right to thrash him, if he could.

Captain Baintree opened his eyes wearily on a white, aseptic hospital room. . . . The girl was Althea, all right. She stood there, looking down on him. And smiling. Sunlight through the drawn rattans gleamed on her red-brown hair. The surgeon was pulling at his sidewhiskers, his red lips pursed reflectively as if he meant at any moment to ask again what they all expected to find down there in Celebes or the Islands on the Line. As if he didn't know. John Aldrich was there, too, standing clean-limbed and straight in fresh white drill with a different look upon his weathered face.

"My Malay boys?" Captain Baintree asked at once. "Did you—"

"They're all right, Harry," Proust growled. "You're not to worry. And don't talk too much. You've got some mending to do."

Harry moved his head a little toward where John Aldrich stood. "Looks like you'll have to wait a bit longer before you smash me down. Mister, you've got a right to try."

For some reason the *Pandoman's* second mate just grinned. "I'll call it quits, Captain Baintree, if you'll just give me a berth next ship you sail. . . . Come on, Doc. Let's clear out."

Baintree watched them go, puzzled. Till he heard the low throatiness of Althea's voice, saying: "He told me, Harry."

He tried to look at her. It was a difficult thing to do. "I'm sorry," he managed at last. "I had to, Althea. There was no other way. He was all awash; the sap was clean out of him. And me going under. It was up to him, and he wasn't any good. So I thought maybe if he hated me enough, it—"

"It might salvage him? Well, it did. I—I can't thank you enough, Harry." Captain Baintree looked away. The palms outside rustled steadily in the northing breeze. A lizard peered at him, motionless by a crack in the opposite wall before it scuttled abruptly out of sight. He thought, why doesn't she go away? He couldn't stand her nearness, knowing what he did. "I said some pretty rotten things about you, Althea. I—"

"Yes; I know." Captain Baintree couldn't know she was smiling. Not till the low laughter bubbled from her lips. Then he looked back up to her, startled. "You certainly ruined my reputation, Harry."

"I wish I could put it straight, Althea, so—"

"You *wish!*" She was wagging a slim, white finger under his nose. She looked terribly angry. Except for that merry smiling just behind her eyes. It didn't go away! "Let me tell you, Harry Baintree, I won't stand for any nonsense from the likes of you! Your underwriters may pay for your lost ship, but that's no good to me. I don't let people go about sullying my good name. You understand? There's only one thing left for you to do. Now you've *got* to marry me!"

"I—" Harry dragged himself up in the cot. Violently. "What's that you said?"

"You heard me quite well enough, Harry Baintree. And don't you try to get out of it! I—"

"But Althea!" His brain spun round. "I thought—"

"Indeed! You thought! I never knew such a silly goose of a man! John Aldrich is my brother, not my husband. And—"

"Althea!"

She touched his hand with hers and bent her head to him so all the sunlight in the room lay in shining pools upon her russet hair. "If you can salvage John the way you did, I don't see why you wouldn't be willing to do as much for a girl's good name."

He was sure she wasn't angry now. Not the way her eyes looked down. So Harry could grin at last. "Who'd try to stop me, Althea?" he asked.

And of course Althea didn't know.

He was sure she wasn't angry now. "Who'd try to stop me, Althea?" he asked.

Illustrated by Charles Chickering

Gabriel,

"I be willing to watch you—once."
"I never missed one yet, Bluebird."

DUNDY LEE stood with his feet planted in sand, watching the train disappear into the desert ahead; then he began appraising himself for injuries. Edging over to the track, he threw a hunk of ballast at a knot in a telegraph pole, to see if the rumpus in the caboose had lamed his pitching arm. He hit the knot squarely. He followed by repeating the feat three times running. Whereupon he felt better.

The smell of cooking came to him, plainly from a blistered jalopy parked beside the wagon road across the wash, and he strolled over to inquire about breakfast.

The deeper blue that met his friendly gray eyes had its source in a suit of boy's blue denim overalls. It was lighted softly, without shadows, by the still early morning glow in the east. A paler blue lay behind narrowed lids under the brim of a felt hat, uptilted at about the height of Dundy's shoulder.

The woman pulled off the hat and twined her thin fingers about the butt of an ancient revolver, the muzzle of which was pointed at his heart.

"Keep out!" she observed distinctly.

Dundy raised his quizzical thumb and forefinger to the peak of his baseball cap. The cap bore black-and-gold tiger-striping, as did also his sweater; but his work trousers and shoes gave him an appearance of roughness.

A second voice spoke, from the left —a girl's voice:

"She means, jes' turn around and vay-ty."

He glanced at the new speaker, and again what he saw, softly lighted, was the deep blue of denim overalls, the light blue of hostile eyes, and slender fingers clasped about a pistol butt. Instead of penciled veining, these hands bore tricky dimples, and they were firm and muscular.

The pistol was clearly a mistake. Dundy was Dundy Lee, pitcher for the champion Los Mirlos Tigers, and at the present moment the biggest man on that desert, all but. He was so good that he was on his way to Los Angeles, to try to get a chance to show what he could do in faster company.

The caboose rumpus had risen from a misunderstanding between Dundy and a gang of cowhands in charge of a shipment of steers. The send-off committee had obtained a drover's pass for him, under a Swedish cow foreman, who did not care for baseball, to save him the price of a ticket.

Dundy tried his strike-out smile, to see how the girl would excuse pointing that pistol at him.

"*Vete* is the Spanish for *get out.*" His voice was lazy and confident and faintly amused. "Me, *vete?* Which way going?"

"Across the tracks!" snapped the girl. "Fast!"

"But I like this side better, Bluebird. The telegraph poles are all set to throw a shade. I'm a pitcher."

She looked like a thoughtful girl, but she was not acting after due thought. Her blue eyes narrowed.

"I said, turn around fast and move straight ahead!"

Again Dundy tried a strike-out smile upon the black muzzle of the pistol. He had warm gray eyes and white teeth, and his sunburned cheeks had puckered into humorous ridges. This smile was very friendly indeed. If he had smiled like this at a girl in Los Mirlos, he would have had to marry her.

The present girl stood eying him unmoved, weighingly now, but remote, like a girl in the pictures. He placed her at not more than eighteen.

"Quit it, Bluebird. Nobody out here ever bluffs with a gun. Guns are out."

"Ef you think I be bluffing—"

"I think you be bluffing." His own brown hand whipped out, grasped her wrist. "See? Not loaded, Bluebird. Your gun is built old-fashioned—it shows the ends of the bullets. You

Blow Your Horn

The story of a girl who was living on roasted grasshoppers and such-like—but didn't want help from a smart-aleck stranger.

by
WILLIAM NEIDIG

can keep it. Now listen. You-all don't need any gun. Everybody in this desert knows who I am. I'm a baseball man. I belong on that train that just pulled out. This is my ticket to prove it. They wrongfully fired me off. My suitcase is still in that caboose—that's the 'Dusty' I am. What for do I drag my tired laigs over your way to talk to women? I smelled your breakfast."

"We can't stop you," said the girl, rubbing her wrist.

"That all you have to eat?"

"Is what all?"

"Hoppers. They smell right good, but white folks don't eat them in this country."

SHE looked more closely at him. Their breakfast lay under a skillet cover. How did he know? When he did not continue, but stood as if accusing her of a crime, she said: "We snipped off their heads and wings and feet and washed them. They're clean. Ef John the Baptist could eat them, we can too. Indians eat them."

"You-all must be hungry, you and your ma, to fall back on hoppers. What did you eat for supper last night?"

He had already noted a tubular skin, drying inside-out on a string, to keep it away from the ants. The string was tied to a pole, leaning against the body of their battered car.

The girl saw his eyes return to it. She flared out: "They eat them canned in Florida! You can buy them in the best restaurants! My fathe. ate one!"

"Fried rattlesnake for su[illegible]er, roast hoppers for breakfast. A rattlesnake will eat hoppers, and so will an Indian. But an Indian won't eat rattlesnake."

Dundy turned to the older woman. "You forgot to put up your empty gun, ma'am. That is better. What I'm sure curious to learn is, knowing this country, what you two women are doing off on this desert road. Don't you-all know it's closed?"

The girl replied quickly, as if to head off her mother: "Bridge out. We know all of that."

But the woman elaborated upon the reason:

"We came this way only because we didn't have gas enough for the detour. We've been working in the fruit in Utah, and had a short season."

"Yes ma'am. And when you reach this bridge that's out, what good will your gas do you?"

Again it was the girl who answered: "After that we can walk the rest of the way. We only go twenty-thirty miles farther. My father owns a mine."

"We have a bee ranch," said the woman. "It's near Ignacio."

The girl looked doubtfully at Dundy's stubborn bulk, at first avoiding his gray eyes, then resenting them. "The mine isn't developed yet. What be you grinning at?"

She was undoubtedly the hostilest girl Dundy had ever seen, and probably also the prettiest. She stood shoulder high, and she had jammed her brimmed hat down on her soft hair until he could make nothing of her forehead contour even when she raised her head. But then he did not need to make anything of it. He had looked into her eyes. He saw her cheeks, nose, lips, chin, throat. Her young beauty went to his head. A girl like that reduced to overalls and hoppers! He forgot his own shabby workclothes and famine status.

"You mentioned John the Baptist. You got John out of a book. You mentioned Indians. A book Baptist! Book Indians! You sure need good advice, Bluebird."

"Ef we be playing at Indian, what be you playing at? White man?" Her lovely nose showed its scorn. "Wait till the wind sees you, Dusty! White man! You're big, and you can grab my wrist, but you can't make me take orders. No rides! No talk-fests! Smiling won't do you any good at all! Your kind smile easy."

He was not smiling now. "What do you know about my kind? Me, sometimes when I'm in a jam, I smile at how I'm going to get myself out. I smiled at you for another reason. You wouldn't get it. What I want of you, Bluebird, you cain't call hoppers, nor free rides, nor your young heart, but just a tin pail. I want to show you something. You-all don't have to eat what I fetch back, but if you do, it won't cost you one thing."

It was the woman who gave Dundy the pail; he thought he caught a hint of friendliness in her older blue eyes, when she handed it to him.

But the girl showed such an excessive lack of interest, he decided in that moment that he would make her cool eyes see him if he never did one other thing.

He enjoyed the play-acting that followed. Hooking the tin pail upon his crooked forefinger, he strode off into the narrow va[illegible]eyond the road and began examining every cat's-claw and milkweed and clump of *galleta* he met. But now and then he set down the pail, bent the seeded head of some shrub over it, and rubbed out the contents between his palms, blowing away as much of the chaff as he could. He saw that the woman watched him openly; but he felt that the girl was the closer observer. He had the luck to obtain what he sought without going very far for it, and returned better pleased with himself.

"Seeds," he explained. "Kids out here eat 'em some. The Indians used to gather them for food, but not much any more. Down in Mexico they still use them. They mix them with flour."

WHEN she saw the quantity he had gathered, the girl dropped some of her hostile manner.

"You gathered them from the plants with the spikes and the crinkly leaves," she said. "What do you call it?"

"In this country only strangers use names, Miss Vanderbleek. Just call it one of the *chia* cousins. My own name is Dundy Lee, but the cow-hands on the train called me *you*. *Dundy* is good enough for strangers."

The woman said: "Our name is Smith."

Dundy said: "You roast them in the skillet, Mrs. Smith."

This time he received a proper invitation, and the three sat down to a breakfast that gave promise of growing merry.

"Your seeds are good," the girl admitted, "ef I do say it."

"You cain't gather them only when they're ripe, which is now. You-all had ought to work fast, when you get home, and lay in as much as you can. I might show you other kinds—mesquite beans, which are half sugar, and cat's-claw, which are not—quail bush, Spanish bayonet, all kinds of seeds. I

might show you pine nuts, too—they grow higher, but squaws still go for them. You-all will have to stay here today, to fill up your pantry. You need meat. You need me to stand over you."

"Oh, yes! . .at!"

Dundy pointed at tracks in the sand.

"See those tracks? Meat made 'em. Jacks. See the two small, two large feet? If I had some wire fence, I might catch you a thousand. Jerked rabbit tastes fine when you're hungry enough. Some folks call it *biltong*. The jacks are good this year. Just clean 'em and take out the bones and hang the meat over a clothes-line. The dry air dries it out. Meat don't taint easy in this climate."

"How do you catch them?" asked the girl.

"With headlights at night is one way. Scare 'em. Snare 'em. Being in baseball, I bean 'em with rocks."

"That would be my way too."

"Just for that, you-all might go with me after meat for dinner. This is chuck country—I might let you see me bean a chuck. I never miss. A chuck has a smaller head—might be harder to hit. Large or small is all the same."

"Woodchucks?"

"Chuckwallas. A chuckwalla is, I cain't hardly tell you what—a big, clumsy, red-backed lizard, with black head and feet. He lives on plants that grow in the rocks, where he can drop down a crack and blow himself up into a football. The Indians used to get him out by letting out the air with a sharp stick; but if he once gets to a crack he's gone, in this country. He has the tenderest, whitest meat you ever tasted. The small lizards are so curious they will let you get close, but chucks not."

"I be willing to watch you—once," said the girl.

"I never missed one yet, Bluebird."

DUNDY selected one rock, he was that sure of himself, and they set out for the lava ridge skirting the road. He had the luck to find a chuckwalla very soon; but when he tried to point out the creature, the girl's eyes were not trained to see it. The careful stalking followed. Not until he threw, did she see the low black head. He ran forward, to hold up his quarry in triumph. His rock had struck precisely where he intended. The missile merely stunned the creature. A moment later it began lashing about with its powerful tail, its one weapon, and he had to kill it with his knife.

The girl was impressed, he saw.

"Ef you could do that every time, Dusty, you'd be rich. I saw your sharpshooting at the conductor, but that was only with your tongue. You did that last very fine."

"The name is Dundy. Dundy Lee. You cain't 'Dusty' people out here, Bluebird. What's the rest of your own name?"

She pulled down her hat, looked away. Presently she said:

"Lissa—for this day only. Ef you could do that now with a baseball, you'd be the greatest pitcher the game have ever known—ef you had the brains."

"With a baseball? Say! You ought to have seen me throw them past big Batch Cassody. And brains is what I was born with."

"My father says the good ones can throw the fade-away any time they want to."

Dundy looked down at her still doubtful hat-brim.

"Now, why should a girl like you make a crack like that? What do you know about the good ones, meaning baseball-players?"

"Before I saw you, don't you mean?"

"I mean."

Her reply made him feel better acquainted. "I've seen most of them. My father always wanted to be a player himself, but he wasn't good enough. Ef he could have hit better—But he used to play a little on the lots, and he liked to see the big ones when he had the chance, and that meant the family too. But that was before he got sick."

"Say! You mean he's sick out here?"

"He has to live on the desert for three years," she told him. "Bad. But ef he couldn't, it would be worse."

He saw that she had said more about her father than she had intended.

The girl's blue eyes narrowed. "I said, turn around fast and move straight ahead!"

Her doubtful hat-brim changed its angle. She looked up at him, and again her eyes openly resented his existence.

Dundy changed the subject back to himself. "Want to see me knock off the head of that milkweed?"

This time she put him in his place. "What's the idea, showing off your grand arm over and over? No, I do not. You be wasting your time."

"You cain't say it, that I be wasting my time." The smile had crept back into Dundy's eyes. "Over and over? You-all ask me that for a question? Then I make you an answer. Because the minute I saw you, I knew who you were."

"And who be I, Mr. Lee?"

Dundy replied boldly: "Next week you will be Mrs. Lee."

Her voice rose into the angriest voice he had ever heard, even though the anger lay behind it rather than in it.

"Peacock talking to the grandstand! Strut, strut! Dundy the Great and his Mrs. Lee! Such a silliness! You have shown that you can rub *chia* seeds into a pail. You have shown that you can hit a chuckwalla with a rock. What else have you shown? An eye for bullets. A killing smile."

"The trouble is, Bluebird, when you're as good as I am in one direction, you don't get credit for the other things you're good at, if any. I fetched you out here to show you something. Well, I showed you. Here's your chuck—and I can do it with a baseball.

"Now listen. In the baseball business you got to think ahead. We be three hungry mouths, and we need a jack to go with this chuck. The jacks are all back of the water-tank, squatting behind creosote bushes with their ears flattened down. Trail along, and we'll get one."

"Ef you don't mind, I'd rather gather *chia*. Bean-balls don't interest me any more, nor tomorrow's grand baseball pitchers. I'm too old. You can leave the chuck with my mother."

"You throw a mean bean-ball yourself," he replied. "But don't think you can scare me with it. I'll be seeing you—from now on."

"I won't talk to you!"

"You'll talk to me," he said. "You'll ask me to ride with you."

LATER in the day at dinner, with saddle of rabbit on the table, and chuckwalla white meat, and jerked rabbit from three other jacks curing in the sun, the older woman did ask him.

"If you wish to ride with us, Dundy, we'd be glad to have you."

The girl laid down her knife. "Mother! Ef Dundy begins talking about himself and his wonderful arm again, I'll jump off the car and run!"

Dundy grinned at her. "You'll ask me to show you," he said.

"How did you know it? How did you dream I'd act like that?" Lissa asked.

Dundy knew he could make the girl talk. If he wanted to he could make her talk about the railroad water-tank. The red steel coffee-pot that was the Quesna water-tank threw a shadow. He could make her talk about that shadow.

A painter had once told him that a red object set in the sun will throw a greenish shadow. A green object will throw a shadow faintly tinged with red—a yellow object one faintly tinged with purple. Painters always paint such shadows using a fleck of green or red or purple on their brush.

When dinner was over Dundy took Lissa and her mother across to the tank, and after that the greenish shadow had two shades of blue in it, besides the yellow from the stripes of his sweater. They sat on the cement sill, on the side away from the tracks, looking into the northwest.

"Yes'm," he remarked to the girl's mother. "Out here where the sun is so bright, all of our shadows have color in them, even when you cain't hardly be sure. The shadow of a blade of grass would have color in it."

The girl allowed her eyes to wander to a distant mountain range. Presently she forgot her pose of aloofness.

"That mountain with the knob on it throws black shadows." said, challenging his statement.

The mountain looked nearer than it was, because of the dry air. Like most mountains in wind-swept desert regions it stood waist-deep in drifted sand.

"Hold the black in my cap against your shadows and see the difference. What fools you is the color of the mountain itself. It isn't red like this tank—it has colors on it you cain't hardly notice. It has green on it from patches of grass, another green from willows, blue from fringed gentians, red from butterflies' wings."

"Nobody can see grass and flowers and butterflies' wings that far," retorted the girl.

BUT Dundy insisted:

"You cain't see grass and such, but you can see the colors. If the colors are there, *they're* there. If you stood on the top of that mountain there you'd be buried in butterflies, just about. Butterflies always swarm around the tops of our mountains. That mountain mixes their colors into its other colors. If you were a butterfly on the top of that mountain you could look down at your ma and me in the shadow of this red tank and all you'd see would be what? A black splotch on a gray carpet! But your ma is blue and I'm half gold, and the shadow itself is greenish. You'd see all these colors a little. You'd see your ma's blue eyes a little."

"Then ef I stood up there among the butterflies my blue overalls would change the color of that mountain?"

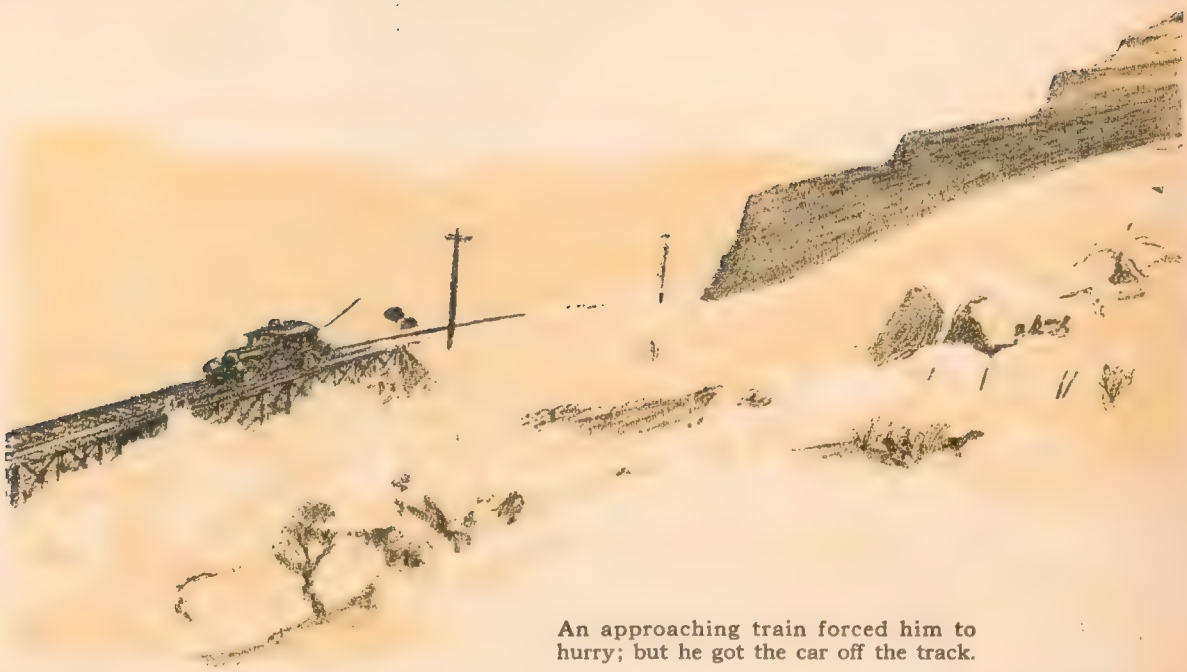
"They'd change it," said Dundy.

"And my blue eyes would change it?"

"Your eyes too a little, because the blue color of them would be there."

Anyhow he had made her talk. He had made her talk about a shadow. Next time he would make her talk about himself. . . .

Next morning he brought up the subject of shadows again, after Lissa had climbed in behind the wheel and they had set out. They had started at sunrise; the long shadow cast by



An approaching train forced him to hurry; but he got the car off the track.

their car lay like a lean finger-shadow in the road ahead. Dundy spoke of this shadow as having the color of blackberry wine dropped into water.

AS the car pressed forward, its wine-tinged shadow swerved over, until the nickel-plated lady on the radiator-cap began bobbing in and out of the sunlight.

Dundy said: "See that shadow now, Bluebird."

The girl sniffed. "Ef you have talked about anything but shadows since yesterday noon, I don't know what!"

The road turned sharply to the left, to run southwest for a few miles, skirting the stump of a butte. When Lissa drew up to read a weathered signboard, Dundy went on:

"Look, Lissa! That sign-post is what I mean. It stands bent over toward the road a little, like a baseball hitter at the plate. He's looking in our direction, and that board over his shoulder is a bat. I'm pitching to him, see? The hour is four o'clock in the afternoon. Behind me on second is number three, waiting to come in on a hit. The score is 0 to 0."

"It would be," said Lissa, "ef you are in it. What game is this—or does it matter?"

"Deciding game of the world series. This guy at the plate is a big Texan. I've got to throw him something he can't hit. In another half hour the sun will be so low the shadow of the grandstand will fall out into the diamond, but it doesn't yet. But this guy's fat shadow falls into the diamond. If I can throw him a fast one with a break on it that starts in bright sunlight and then cuts into his shadow, his eye will have to make allowance, and if he tries to lean on one it will be just too bad. I thought it up myself. I call it the flicker ball. I cut the corners too, and give 'em the high-low and all that, and on top of that I throw into the shadow at just the right place. It wouldn't work except when the diamond is turned right and the hitter stands right. There's something in it, Lissa."

She leaped the car forward, to tell him that her interest in shadows was at an end. Her manner toward him changed. She began asking him to do this or that, not as one would ask a guest, but as one might ask the hired man.

Dundy threw out his chest and patted it. Time passed. They stopped in the shade of a mesquite for dinner, rested, moved on. Her demands upon him continued. Again he grinned and obeyed her. In his opinion she was weakening fast.

"Dundy, ef you would get out and walk your weight a while, till we're past this bad sand drift—" she would say. Or: "Could you push for a minute, Dundy?" Or: "Something fell off, Dundy. See what it was."

Even at the "Bridge Out" sign that marked the end of their travel by car, she spoke to him rudely. He had helped the two women down into the precipitous Burger's Wash, and then across it and up the further side, ready to begin the long walk to the bee ranch.

"You've got us over here," she said. "Now what?"

"Lissa!" her mother reproved.

"We could have stayed at the car, Mother, in the shade, until after supper."

Dundy set down a can of water. "I have fifty dollars saved up, Lissa," he said, without explaining as yet why he said it. "Fifty dollars!"

He pointed into the southwest. Into the distance ahead ran their road, bony from much plucking away of its flesh by the wind, crossed by sand drifts, gouged through by cloudbursts, hot, disused.

"That's a long road, Bluebird. You own a good bus. You folks sit down in the sun and sing songs, or stand up, or walk yourselves cool. I'm going back for your car. If I wreck it, you get the fifty."

DUNDY brought in the car by the expedient of driving across an alkali flat to a point where he could mount the railroad embankment, and then riding the ties to the railroad bridge.

True, an approaching train forced him to hurry, toward the last; the terrific bumping shook out a misfit cap; he lost so much gasoline, the

engine later would not start; but he got the car off the track.

The girl had been frightened. She said: "That wasn't so good, Dundy. That was just grandstand. What was the use? We'll have to walk anyhow."

Again his gray eyes laughed down at her.

"You-all can make camp for the night near the bus. I can walk to Ignacio for enough gas to carry us in."

"It would be a punishment," said Lissa.

"Lissa!" Again her mother showed her distress.

"A punishment, Mother, and it serves him right for scaring us."

Dundy spoke to the older woman. "I'm like something she owns, ma'am, is why Lissa talks that way."

Later he braved the girl's scorn to say to her: "I aim for us to reach Los Angeles in three days. I'm telling you so as you can be ready."

"Not ef you was the last man on earth!"

Her reply did not deject him. He set out at sunset, swinging at once into a four-mile training gait. When he came to the first bend in the road he stopped and looked back. The evening sky, stained with every gradation of color from pearl to crimson, threw its warm light upon two slender figures in blue denim, but only one of them was waving a handkerchief.

He waved his peaked cap in farewell. The last man on earth? Give him the three days! A good pitcher always holds back something to have it in reserve.

THE car was like Saturday's bake oven, everything about it too hot to be touched except by lizards. The afternoon sun all but drove the shadow of the roof through the floor. But Dundy, born on that desert, regarded the shadow as shade, and purred like a cat. The girl was driving—she looked cool. He felt cool; his woolen sweater kept out the heat.

He dragged forth a package of hot cigarettes.

"Might you-all draw for a good one?" he asked.

"No, thanks."

"I bought double, not knowing. You cain't deny that Ignacio is trying to draw my trade. Both stores sell them."

He glanced again at the girl. Her uptilted lovely young nose still expressed scorn, but she had exchanged the deep blue of her denim overalls for the blue of her prettiest dress, and she had driven to town expressly for him. Her mother had asked him to visit them today. He had stayed overnight in Ignacio. His affairs seemed to be turning out right well.

"Tomorrow we two go to the city," he reminded her.

She flared up: "Me? With you? Ef anybody could make me!"

"I made you talk when you wouldn't, and I can make you marry me when you won't."

"Strut, strut!"

"Old peacock cain't strut much, hardly, Lissa, sitting down on a leather cushion."

On reaching the ranch, Lissa took him to her mother, and they all walked out to where her father sat in the shade mending comb frames.

"Dad, ef you will, look up for a minute!" Her voice had become as honey. "See what I've brought you! A big-league baseball pitcher! This is the Dundy Lee we told you about, and he has brains! You should have seen him match wits with the chuckwallas! He can throw a walnut through a knot-hole, and he has the fastest fast one you ever saw! He throws them into the shadows!"

"She's talking sarcastic about me, Mr. Smith. I made her mad. I sure do have the old control, and I sure do smoke 'em through. But that shadow stuff— All pitchers throw 'em into the shadows. Me, I do it on purpose, playing the edges."

"I mentioned the brains!" said Lissa.

Abel Smith looked at him with kindly eyes. "What team do you train with?"

"Not any yet, Mr. Smith. I haven't decided."

"Hm. If you could see the bushels of letters from boys begging for try-outs! Still—a walnut through a knot-hole. . . . Want to throw me a few? I own a glove and ball. I might send you to a scout I know."

Dundy went grave again. "I cain't rightly ask anything better than that, Mr. Smith." He looked at Lissa. "This is where I play to the grandstand. When I'm through, you-all will know you have seen something."

He believed that he had her. He believed he knew women that well.

LISSA and her mother stayed to watch the throwing. Abel Smith laid a slab of slate on the sand, to serve as a plate, and stepped off the distance to the mound. Dundy showed the folks his strike-out smile.

It happened exactly as he had planned. Instead of a strike, his first was a ball, high and wide. His second was a ball—too low. His third was a pitch-out. Four, five, six times he failed to put the ball over; then ten, fifteen, twenty times. He threw balls enough to fill the bases twice over, every one of them wide. A walnut through a knot-hole? A stranger would have said he could not have thrown one through a barn door. When Abel Smith rapped out: "Now show me your fast one," Dundy put so much weight against the ball he could have pushed over the barn, without adding five miles an hour to its speed.

Abel Smith spoke kindly to him. "That will do, son. The big fellows would knock your ears off. Control is what you haven't got, and your fast one rolls up with the brakes set."

Dundy had known what Abel would say. He humbly walked in and handed over the ball, his face a blank. He acted as if such a disaster had never before fallen upon him, as if his collapse was the most painful, the most humiliating, the most incredible, that any man had ever experienced. He pulled his cap down over his eyes, refusing to look at Lissa. That was the hardest. Then he held out his hand to Abel.

"I cain't rightly say I showed you much, Mr. Smith. So I'll be going."

As he stood there the rest of his plan began to work out. Lissa's tight young voice, with no sarcasm in it, spoke up unashamedly: "We can't go tonight, Dundy. I want to visit with Dad."

Abel said: "Not tonight, of course. What are his plans?"

Lissa replied quickly: "Not his! Ours! Ours! Dundy's and mine! We're moving on to Los Angeles tomorrow by train."

"Dundy and you, Lissa?"

"We're getting married. Dundy has fifty dollars saved up. We'll have to make it do till we can find jobs."

Her mother cried: "Lissa!"

Abel asked: "How long have you known this young man, Lissa?"

Lissa told him: "Mother and me saw him pitch Sunday's game in Los Mirlos. You might say, sence Sunday."

She stood eying Dundy as if daring him to express surprise at her announcements.

Dundy's downcast features did not light up betrayingly, but Lissa surprised an odd look as of dancing in his lowered eyes. What he said was of no consequence. Yet it did have a bearing on what he had said earlier with respect to the railroad.

"We-all may have to go back to my home town, Lissa. I had the agent at Quesna water-tank send a day-letter to a lawyer friend of mine there, about being thrown off the train, and he answered at Ignacio that I have a case. It might mean money coming in."

Lissa assented without so much as blinking. "Ef we have to, Dundy."

It was at this point that Dundy dropped his pose of dejection. "But we can go to Los Angeles first. Maybe we could look up that scout Mr. Smith spoke of."

IT needed only that remark to open Lissa's eyes.

"Dad! Ef we be'n't the dummies! Why, certainly! Twenty-four straight balls, and not one strike even by accident! And you said Dundy didn't have any control!"

"Tomorrow will make the three days," remarked Dundy idly.

Lissa turned on him. "I see it all! When you threw those six base-loads of wild balls to Dad you threw them on purpose! Don't you say you didn't! You knew what I would do!"

"I cain't rightly deny it, Bluebird."

"How did you know it? How did you dream I would act like that?"

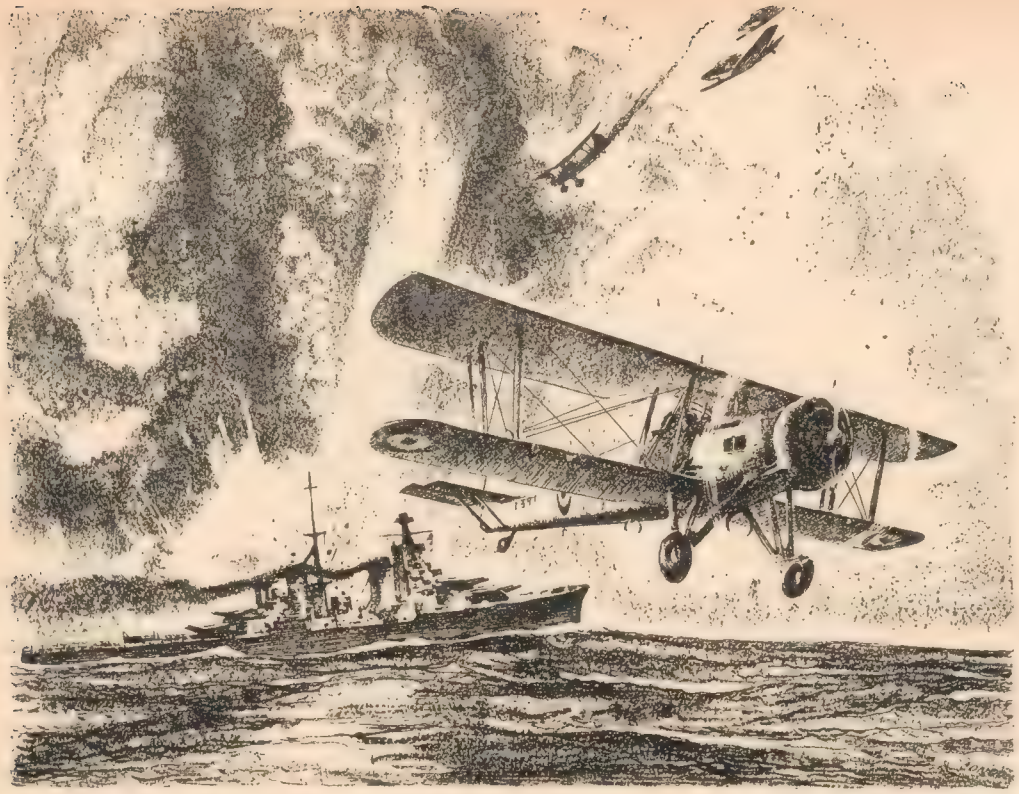
Among Dundy's memories was one of a friend's sister, who had chosen to marry a teacher instead of a rich merchant, because the teacher needed her more.

"I figured you were that kind of a girl."

"And me saying, ef you had the brains!"

She looked at him with shining eyes.

"Dundy! I want you to take that baseball and show my father your goods, and no fooling!"



Torpedo Twitch

He had torpedo-twitch—and you can't sink Woppo cruisers if you break your torp. But Gunner Cockles, had a bright and brutal idea.

by ARCH WHITEHOUSE

"GREAT pilot, that chap Hetheridge," the Flight-deck Officer was saying to the Chief Petty Officer pilot just out from Rosythe. "Perfect for this job. He got a Swordfish off the *Glorious* when she had a thirty-six-degree list. Must have flown her off on the rudder."

The C.P.O. pilot simply nodded. He'd heard about Hetheridge.

"Ah, a great pilot is Hetheridge," the Flight-deck Officer muttered. "If he could only get a torp off!"

"Perhaps he's afraid of his wings, sir. A lot of them are a bit chary on the dive—afraid their wings'll buckle."

The Flight-deck Officer couldn't know Flying Officer Gilbert Hetheridge had torpedo twitch. You have to fly with a man to learn that. Only Cockles McSwitch, his C.P.O. gunner, knew—and Cockles was loyal. On other matters, Armament Artificer McSwitch usually held forth with all the sublety and self-effusion of a Whitechapel barrel-organ.

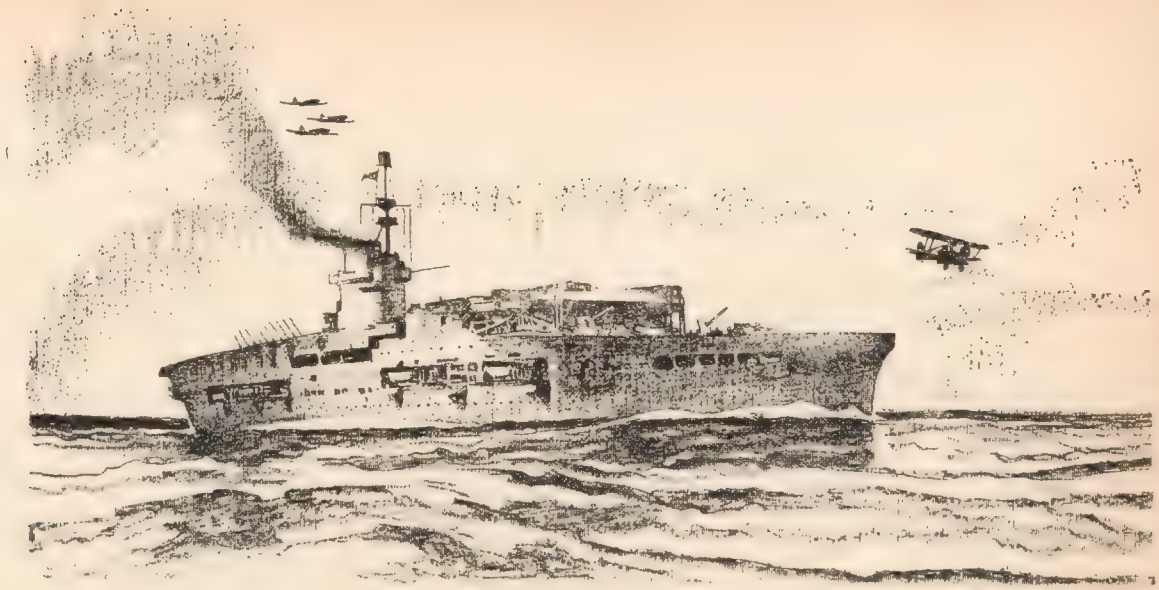
There is little in the records of the Admiralty which gives any light on how Cockles wangled his way into the Fleet Air Arm. His certificate of baptism—suitably mounted in a fretwork frame cornered with disks of cork from the ginger-brandy bottle that provided the master touch after the ceremony—disclosed that Cockles had been formally christened before the age-stained sandstone font of the old Bow Church, and suitably registered in the parish as Redvers Henry McSwitch.

The Admiralty records do not disclose, however, how Cockles attained his lofty rank or by what criminal distortion of facts he came in possession of his Good Conduct stripes. But to be fair, there was never any question as to his right to the blue ribbon of the Albert Medal or the details as to how he won his Distinguished Flying Medal. It is well known, from the Petty Officer's Mess huddled under the port bow pompom recess to the *Escapade's* overhanging stern, that his partiality for the succulent bivalve mollusk dispensed from the Lambeth fish-stalls was responsible for his service nickname.

Cockles was built on much the same general lines as a Merseyside derrick. He was massive of shoulder, bumpingly bulbous about the buttocks, a feature further intensified by his tightly laced bell-bottoms; and his legs appeared to have been carved from a pair of badly warped newel posts. His face reflected all the guile, gutter percipiency and slum-inspired philosophy one might expect as the result of unfortunate circumstances and costermonger environment.

Equip all this with a set of service blues, zipper it into an oversize Sidcot suit, frame the face in the curved collar of a Mae West life-jacket and strap the lot together with the stanch webbing of a parachute harness, and you begin to get some idea of what F. O. Hetheridge marked high when it came to listing his horrors of war.

For that matter Flying-officer Hetheridge could find nothing beautiful



about this torpedo-bomber business. He was of the honest opinion that an aircraft-carrier was the most revolting example of naval architecture that man had ever conceived.

The Fairey Swordfish he had been posted to fly was a blunt-nosed vulture with lines more suitable for a battering-ram than a winged weapon of aërial glory. He detested the long misproportioned flight-deck of the *Escapade,* the shapeless if efficient island superstructure cluttering up her starboard rail, and the wanton disregard for balance with which the aircraft lifts had been hacked out of the teak landing-platform.

Hetheridge hated it all, this cruel business of bombing; he hated the unbridled destruction that was taking place all about him and in which he himself was playing an active if inglorious part. He nurtured every desire to live up to the traditions of the service and to justify his rank, but he had torpedo-twitch, a weakness you develop from thinking too much at the Armament School.

It's a mistake to show Fleet Air Arm men the delicacy of a war-head and illustrate the speed of a cartridge detonator. It's even worse to show them the chunk of Krupp plate which has been battered by a Whitehead torpedo. They do all that at Gosport; and if you think too much about it, you get torpedo-twitch.

MALTA was almost four hours' sailing time behind them when Hetheridge's section was brought up on the aft lift and trundled into the shelter of the superstructure. The signal panel on the streamlined funnel began to scrawnch and flutter as the Senior Signals Officer repeated an order over the wind-flecked collar of Signaler Symes on the bridge.

The escorting destroyer *Wren* came up with a flutter of Mediterranean embroidery at her bow and took up a Boomps-a-Daisy position aft, where her dory crew could boathook any unfortunates who failed to get off the deck. The baked-potato blokes in their asbestos suits huddled near the blast-screen, opening and closing their metal cutters in professional anticipation. Diggers, the Flight-deck Officer in an R.A.F. greatcoat and a storm helmet, stood wide-legged in the palisades pointing an "Action" finger at the cinema port under the bridge, so that they would have film evidence of any infraction of take-off rules.

The mechanics were closing the wings and locking the spar-joints with cheerful, "Port wing locked, sir!" There was a general scampering back and forth under the wing-tips. They patted the red war-heads affectionately and penciled ribald remarks on the fins. The Muss' raiding squadron had come out!

McSwitch was arguing with an Artificer 2nd Class concerning the military glory and genius of his ancestry.

"My father *was* in the Rifle Brigade, I tell you," he bellowed, his arms loaded with Lewis gun drums. "They were at Khartoum, Defense of Ladysmith in South Africa, 1899 to 19-ort-2. 'E was there!"

"Wot was you singin' larst night in the wet canteen?" the Artificer 2nd Class demanded.

"Well, wot was I singin'?"

"Bellerin' at the top of yer pipes, somethink abart, ''Ere's to the Maiden of Bashful Fifteen'. Aint that the regimental chune of the King's Liverpool Regiment?"

"Look 'ere!" McSwitch put down the ammunition to get a better semaphore effect. "Don't you know that when a bloke becomes very good at somethink, they allus transfer 'im to some other mob—for the good of the service? My father was in the Liverpools too. They fought at Afghanistan in 1878—Cambrai in 1917."

"You just read that stuff orf cigarette pictures," argued the Artificer 2nd Class. "What abart the night in Valetta when you was spiffed and wanted to play 'Burlington Bertie' on the church organ?"

"Wot abart it?"

"You said it was the March Past of the London Scottish. 'Ow can you march to 'Burlington Bertie'?"

"Don't the Scottish wear kilts, and don't they 'ave to make 'em swing, like this?" And Cockles strutted so his parachute pack flipped back and forth to his Whitechapel warble of:

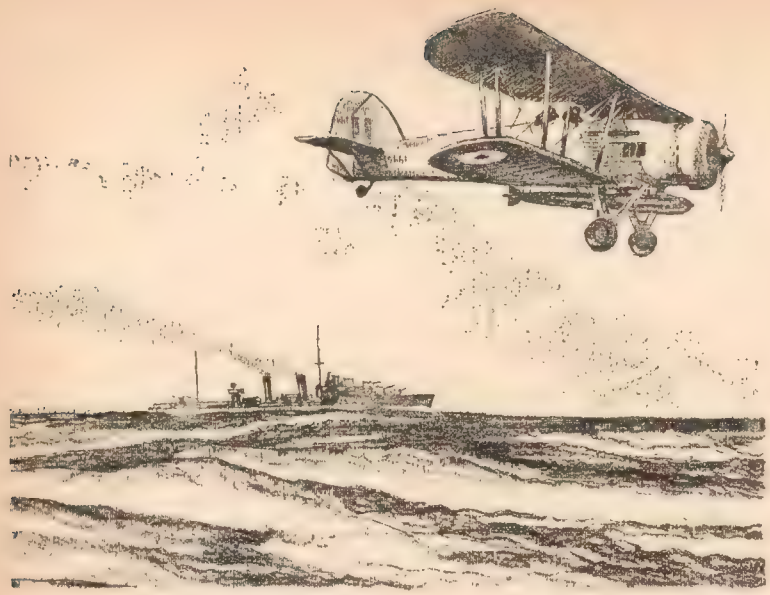
"I'm Bert, Bert,
And Royalty's 'urt
When they arsk me to dine—
I say, no!
I've just 'ad a banana,
Wiv Lady Diana,
I'm Burlington Bertie from Bow!
Bow Wow!"

"Coo, you aint arf balmy, you know," the Artificer 2nd Class observed, scratching his neck. "Pity yore bloke don't 'ave a bit of the McSwitch stuff in 'im. Just eatin' a bloody good soldier's grub, is yore bloke."

"Wot's the matter wiv Mr. 'Etheridge?" bristled Cockles.

"Wot aint the matter wiv 'im? 'Ad the bloody *Leipzig* in 'is sights at Narvik an' let 'er get away. It was the *Leipzig,* my lad, wot blew the *Glorious* out of the warter two days later. And look wot a mess 'e made of it in the Taranto show, Mr. McSwitch. Cracked 'is bloody torp on the dive."

"That could 'ave been a defective projectile," Cockles managed to gargle. "That could 'ave been."



The strident roar of Pegasus engines drowned out the rest, but Cockles knew full well what the rest of the story was. His bloke had had the *Vittotio Veneto* dead on in the Ionian Sea affair, but he had dived his Swordfish at the wrong angle, and the torpedo had broken its back long before it was anywhere near the *Veneto's* hull. Cockles knew full well that they couldn't all be "defective projectiles."

They'd had a chance at Narvik, at Taranto and in the other mess to add to the undying glory of the McSwitches, but somehow Mr. 'Etheridge made a bloomer of it.

"Never mind, Mr. 'Etheridge, we'll get a torp in, one of these days," he muttered to himself as he watched three Fulmar fighters come up on the clanking lifts from below to be run over near the 4.5 guns by the deck ratings. "It may take a bit o' doin', but we'll manage it, some'ow."

HETHERIDGE pulled on his gloves and waited for a C.P.O. to climb down from the cockpit.

"Hope you have a bit of luck this time, sir," the C.P.O. said, holding the *"Serviceable"* logbook open for the pilot to initial.

"Have you ever seen the *Raimondo,* Spreckles?" asked Hetheridge.

"No sir. We're always a bit too far behind for that sort of thing. You people have all the luck in this game, sir."

"She's a beautiful vessel," the Englishman glowed, his calm sapphire eyes sweeping the sea over the Ack-Ack recesses. "She has a tower foremast, a truncated forefunnel and splendid deck-lines."

"I like to see them on their backs with torpedo holes in the hull and their screws showing. Will you ever forget the old *Glorious,* sir?"

"I'm not likely to," Hetheridge reflected. "They never let me. But it's easier for these U-boat chaps. They don't have to go in fifteen feet *above* the water with every damned pompom firing point-blank."

"I'll never forget the old *Glorious,* sir," the C.P.O. went on. "I'd love to get where I could pull the plug and let one of these Whiteheads slam into one of them!"

Hetheridge tried to explain: "It all depends on what you're pulling. Now in dive-bombing, it's different. You come almost straight down, and there's very little for them to shoot at and your projectile has an armor-piercing nose."

"I'd be afraid of my wings, sir. Don't you ever think about your wings?"

Hetheridge didn't answer that, so the C.P.O. never found out. The Flying Officer was thinking again, trying once more to unravel the skein of fate that had led him into the cockpit of a torpedo-bomber. He had always wanted to fly a fighter; he figured that in a fighter you could take your chances and clear off when it got too tough. That's how you lived through a war; but you can't clear off when you have a 1500-pound projectile with a warhead between your legs. You can't come back and land on a carrier with that damned thing. You have to dump it somewhere, and in the back seat there's always a Cockles McSwitch with an urge for military glory, to report where you dumped it.

He wished he could tell all this to the Senior Air Officer. He'd tried several times, but somehow he never quite got it out.

"I wouldn't like dive-bombing either, sir," McSwitch broke in. "I'd be afraid we'd pull our wings orf too. I saw an 'Enschel once, 'avin' a go at the *Warspite.* Coo! Just slithered clean out of 'er wings, she did!"

"But he could have taken to the silk," argued Hetheridge. "At least, he had that much chance."

"'E didn't, sir! They put a dory over and tried to get 'im out of the mess, but he drownded. You see wot I mean, sir?"

"I see what *you* mean," agreed Hetheridge, drawing his chin-strap tighter and climbing up on the wing root. "But when you go in with a torp, you have to be totally oblivious of what you have in the crotch. Somehow, I've never quite managed that happy state of mind."

Cockles stood staring up at his bloke, realizing again that he was flying with a fear-haunted man, who was braver than any of the others so jocularly thumbing their "Ready" signals at the Flight-deck Officer.

He glanced about and then plucked at the C.P.O.'s sleeve: "'Ere, wot was that 'e said? That being 'totally oblivious' abart somethink?"

The C.P.O. wagged his head, flipped up Cockles' ear-flap. "He means being blotto, numb in the noggin, off his onion—any of those things."

"I see," nodded Cockles. "Well, that might 'elp—at the right time."

He climbed up into the gunner's cockpit, secure in his determination that Mr. 'Etheridge wouldn't get torpedo-twitch this time.

THE steam-jet was feathering out from the nozzle at the lip end of the flight-deck, and the helmsman brought the *Escapade* around into the wind. The white plume left a damp patch of condensation on the guide-line that split the deck from bow to stern.

Again the signal panel fluttered and jangled its metal blades, flushing the Flight-deck Officer from his weather cover in the palisade.

"You watch this chap Hetheridge," he warned the probationary pilots. "Watch the way he senses every gust, and rudders it out before it begins to swing him. Take notice of his rudder touch. He got that, sailing a Penzance sloop. You can't beat sailingmen for touch."

The F.D.O. took over with a criss-cross flutter of his hand semaphores until he got the nod from the Senior Air Officer on the bridge and an open-palm "Ready" signal from Hetheridge. He raised one disk above his head. The deck ratings scrambled like street urchins, yelled check orders, yanked the wheel-chocks and darted clear. The F.D.O.'s arm went down, sending eight hundred horsepower and fifteen hundred pounds of scarlet-nosed torpedo down the black line.

"I wonder if there's a woman in that chap's life," the Senior Air Officer said aloud from the hood of his Vitabuoy wind-jacket.

"Keep the baby in the cradle, sir!"

The Yeoman of Signals huddled a bit closer and offered: "Well, he has a lady's name painted on the stern of the trimmest little sloop you've ever seen. Picture of it in his cabin, sir."

"That so? Then it's probably his mother's name. Sailing chaps seldom divide their allegiance," the S.A.O. muttered.

The mortar-nosed torpedo bomber thundered past the forward deck-lift platform, the pilot ruddering her skillfully between the two flush-deck catapult impulser tracks. Hetheridge eased the load that constricted the cables of his groin as the down-draft under the bow lip hissed to suck them under. There was a dull hollow emptiness to everything as they hung suspended for the eon of time before he dared ease back on the control and get her clearer. The devil prods at the scab of fear as one waits for the thud of oblivion that trails in the wake if eight hundred horsepower slobbers down to a hushed gurgle of betrayal.

Cockles McSwitch had no such fears. He had no imagination, except for his distortion of military history. He rather enjoyed that switchback canter down the deck. With his back to Hetheridge and his feet braced against the camera mounting, he thumbed his snub cherry nose at the baked-potato blokes as they knifed past the blast-screen. The tail swayed, and the fin fanned the view of the retreating aft deck. The black guideline raced away and seemed to be winding itself up like a tape into the torpedo jutting from under the nose of the second Swordfish.

Hetheridge filled his safety-belt again and brought the plane around in a smooth climbing turn that might have been plotted on a set of French curves, and watched the second machine of his section run down the deck and then suddenly whang over with a savage split-us turn, clambering wildly for altitude.

That would be Chief Petty Officer Matcham, the only rati ; pilot in the section. Only Matcham took off like that—whanging into cockeyed turns, and outraging the ether with Somerset profanity. Matcham loved all this. Volunteered for raids on any pretext.

Then came Rollins—Pilot-officer Reggie Rollins. . . . Reg Rollins, who could be seasick in a punt on the Thames, but who could do more tricks with a Swordfish than a Fleet Air Arm test pilot.

The Fulmar fighters were being wheeled into position now—grim snubby devils that are thirty miles an hour faster than Mr. Air Ministry admits. Hetheridge cut across, churning through the pungent smoke discharged from the *Escapade's* funnel, and rammed for a position where Matcham and Rollins could slither in from behind and take up their posts. Ahead fantailed the light cruisers. Outside, the *Warspite* and the *Barham* glared condescendingly at the zigzag antics of the destroyers.

In five minutes the first section of torpedo bombers was at three thousand and racing north for Valona. The Fulmars were somewhere upstairs, spreading a winged blanket of protection.

"'Ave they come out, sir?" Cockles bellowed over Hetheridge's shoulder when they had reached their angle area.

"Who can we believe?" parried the pilot. "Supposed to be three heavy cruisers in the harbor. Possibly the *Bolanzo*, the *Trieste* and the *Turin*."

Cockles pondered on the law of averages as experienced in his past excursions to Epsom Downs on Derby Day. How could they miss getting one?

"Big 'uns, aint they, sir?"

"The *Bolanzo* is about ten thousand tons. Quite a nice vessel."

"Plenty of it to 'it then, sir."

Hetheridge ignored that, ruddered a trifle and then added: "She's big enough to mount eight 37 m/m Ack-Ack guns, and eight more of the 13-point-2 bore. They can give us hell!"

"But we don't mind that, do we, sir?" Cockles said comfortingly. "You give 'em the torp, and I'll salt-and-pepper 'em wiv my rattlers."

"Now the *Turin*," Hetheridge went on, "is just the opposite. Looks like a houseboat rigged for washday!"

"Well, that won't matter when she's on 'er back wiv 'er screws showin'. Saw a picture of the old *Blücher* once. Right on 'er back she was, and blokes runnin' abart like ants orl over the blinkin' 'ull. That was the other war, sir."

Cockles' bellowing resounded off the instrument board and erupted back full into Hetheridge's face like the blast from a berserk loud-speaker.

"Ah, the other war," agreed Hetheridge. "That must have been a good war. I suppose Jutland was even better than this."

"That it was, sir. My father was at Jutland."

Hetheridge snapped around in his seat and questioned that: "Jutland? I thought he was with the Rifle Brigade at Armentieres!"

"Well, 'e was, sir. But they wanted 'im to teach the Royal Marines orl abart the Lewis gun."

"Lewis guns in the Jutland show?"

"Just in case, like! For boardin' parties: only the bloody 'Uns cleared orf. Didn't get 'is charnst until the Zeebrugge affair. My father was the first one orf the old *Daffodil*, an' up on the Mole. Chargin' like mad, sir!"

"You never told me that before."

"One orfficer wanted to put 'im in for the Victoria Cross, sir, but another bloke said 'e was drawin' the enemy's fire and booked 'im for a D.C.M."

"Distinguished Conduct Medal?"

"No sir. A district court-martial. My father was unlucky like that."

"I can't believe it," Hetheridge muttered.

"I was afraid you wouldn't, sir. There's not many as do, but 'e did get the court-martial. Still, 'e got out of it." Then he added, "Was your father in the *other* war, sir?"

Hetheridge nodded reflectively: "He went west—at Jutland. He was a surgeon aboard the *Invincible* when she went down."

"'E was? Coo! Then you 'ave somethink to talk abart, sir." Cockles beamed. "It's nice to 'ave fathers like that. I wonder if we'll ever 'ave nippers who'll talk abart wot we did."

Hetheridge wondered if he'd ever do anything worth talking about—and if he'd live long enough to "'ave nippers." Now that chap Matcham, he had a couple. Always showing their letters to the Senior Air Officer when he got the chance.

THE sawtoothed hills of Corfu came through the blue gash that fissured the piled-up clouds above the Mediterranean, and Cockles laboriously went to work on his chart. The long western side of the island curled out into a ball-pein hammer bulge farther north and gave the gunner something to work on. Hetheridge checked with Matcham and Rollins and then called

Prentice, the Fulmar formation leader.

There was a minute or so of carrier hum, and then the jangling vibration of headphone plates that made Hetheridge recoil sidewise.

"Keep going! Keep going!" ranted Prentice. "We're doing a bit of riveting on some old Fiats up here. Look out for the spare parts!"

Hetheridge frowned and tried to find the action that was going on upstairs. A jagged bundle waving a pair of metal propeller-arms went twisting and screeching into a cloud-bank not thirty feet away. Hell in specialized packets was being detonated up there. A wing-section with a blazing fuel-tank fluttered into view and floundered into a series of flat plane glides, dragging a black pennant behind.

The three Swordfish edged away and then shot out into the blue.

Cockles saw the opposition first, and jerked at his Fairey gun-mounting with a rasp that set a file edge on Hetheridge's teeth. The guns bounced against their own recoil and spat two streams of cupronickel full into the throat of a diving Messerschmitt. The Me. 109 staggered like a winged partridge and zoomed up, the sunlight shivering off in pie-wedge section from the prop blades. There was a choked gush, and pointed fingers of flame jabbed out from the cowling.

"There's one for our nippers to talk abart, sir!" Cockles bellowed over his shoulder.

The other Swordfish gunners were in the thick of it now. The Mess-ups broke formation and came at them from all angles. The A.G.'s wrestled with their ancient mountings and released short infighting blows. Hetheridge moved his hand to yank the torp clear, but Cockles yelled: "Don't slip it, sir! Don't slip it!"

Hetheridge swallowed, treadled his rudder and cursed under his breath. He muttered something about adjusting a brake-flap for a dive.

"Keep the baby in the cradle, sir!" yelled Cockles over his shoulder as he swung his guns again. "The Fulmars have them well in 'and now, sir!"

Why did McSwitch always sense this fear in him? Why wasn't he afraid of torps? Why take all this risk for the chance of blowing a cruiser out of the water—to see the screws glisten in the sunlight?

It was still there, that long canister of high explosive hanging directly below their bellies. The detonator alone would blow a man's leg off!

Hetheridge looked down between his wide-spread knees and wondered which section of the torpedo exploded first. The crotch-straps of his brolly harness seemed to tighten in sympathy across his thighs.

The scrawnch of toothed latches and the rattle of Lewis guns had ceased, and Cockles was sucking the end of his pencil reflectively and studying a short stubby brass device near his left knee. The three torpedo-bombers had slithered into tight formation, and the pilots were reporting through to Hetheridge. He listened, his ears standing guard with his duty while his mind concentrated on another field.

"If you think you took too many in that wing, Matcham, don't try an attack dive," he advised the C.P.O. pilot, suddenly thinking of the two "nippers" back home who wrote letters the Senior Air Officer seemed to enjoy. "No use risking it if the main spar is hit. Flop your torp anywhere if we get all the way in."

"If I see that Woppo tugboat, I'm having a go," growled Matcham. "I'm sticking one in his guts if I have fly through the chart-room!"

"BRING me a map if you do," broke in Rollins from the other corner of the triangle. "I'm using an old Michelin motorcar guide. On one side it says, *'Be sure to see the beautiful marble vase with a relief showing Mercury, followed by dancing Bacchanalian figures where he gives the young Bacchus to a nymph to be brought up.'* How'd you like to be brought up by a nymph, Hetheridge?"

"I know," Hetheridge said with strange enthusiasm into his flap-mike. "You must be reading the Naples page. That's the *Galleria del Toto Farnese* in the National Museum. Turn to the page on Valona!"

"I'd sooner bring up a nymph," Matcham said from behind Hetheridge's port elevator. "You ought to see the two I've brought up already. They're nymphs, they are! Young Claridge used up a pound of lard last week, making a slide on the kitchen floor. Wait till I go home on leave—I'll lard him!"

"Is Valona in Albania?" called Rollins. "Who's Albania fighting for this week?"

Hetheridge didn't answer. He just sat tight and stared ahead and tried to readjust his world. Why didn't young Rollins worry where Valona was? Didn't it matter to him that he was carrying a Whitehead between his wheels? And Matcham, who was bringing up two kids on a C.P.O.'s pay, and doing as much flying as any squadron leader—and carrying torps! They were actually enjoying all this. Matcham, with two kids who used up the rationed lard to make slides! Matcham was looking for a Woppo boat to stick a torp into, when he already had a shot-up main spar! Young Rollins, with everything to live for. A home, a family and his old man M.F.H. of the Grafton Hunt.

But Cockles had no such thoughts. His mind was on a little fish-shop in

"You have to be totally oblivious," said Hetheridge.

Lambeth. His eye was still on the chubby brass device at his knee. He put the prospects of buying the fish-shop against the possibility of Mr. 'Etheridge cracking his torp again, and muttered something about being "totally oblivious," and considered a suitable answer to a certain Artificer 2nd Class.

They screeched on, leaving the Fulmars to deal with the Mess-ups.

The thud of shells obstacled their course with grayish-black blobs of high-explosive smoke long before the mountain backdrop sheltering the harbor could be discerned. High-angle guns snarled and barked from Saseno, the guardian pile at the mouth of the channel, and trailed streamers of defiance across the sky.

As they edged in from the southeast, the sunlight tipped the old minarets, and the subdued tones of the palace were washed over with a maize-tinted rinse. Plumes of steam swept up from the sawmills in the hills of Smoktina and vainly attempted to wave flags of truce over the old city.

"There they are, sir!" reported Cockles over Hetheridge's shoulder. "There's two at the main jetty, and another at the quay just below those oil-tanks. Gawd, what a charnst!"

A bracketing fire of shrapnel hung a necklace of explosive around them, leaving a series of spreading blotches. A chunk of metal gouged a shapeless

cavity in the leading edge of their lower port wing.

"Wind's in the other direction, sir," warned Cockles, trying to warm his bloke up to the possibilities. "We'd better go in from that side. We'll be 'eading the right way out, too."

Hetheridge gave the oak-fringed hillside a quick glance and stifled the pangs of homesickness. Those hills might have been rolling down to Mullion Cove or St. Ives Bay. The *Valerie* might be bobbing at her mooring down there.

But then the same old fear was searing him. Something was being peeled off him. It was being turned back at a point just below that lump in his throat, and it was coming away like a sheaf of tight cellophane and making the same sound. It hurt like the rip of proud flesh, and then sizzled as it curled back over the breadth of his shoulders. At the same time he was thinking of those kids of Matcham's and how they would love the surf at Mullion Cove. . . .

"You aint going to overshoot, are you, sir?" raged Cockles, bringing him out of it.

Hetheridge brought his Swordfish over and peered down the length of the bottom wing and took a sight on the long jetty that .ingered out from a small graving dock like a shepherd's crook. He flipped over from the other side and spoke the order carefully.

"In line-astern for torp attack!"

The others came around as if swung out from wires, and the guns on the jetty bashed another series of bracketing shots that outlined jet necklaces a few hundred feet above them.

"Broadside attack on two cruisers at main jetty!" chanted Hetheridge into his flap-mike. "Give it plenty of angle. Take plenty to be sure. That goes for you, Matcham!"

The three torpedo bombers plummeted through the salvo of three-inch stuff coughing all about them. Their noses went down, and Hetheridge led the way to the peel-off spot as he twirled the wheel of the flap-adjustment gear. There was a dull snubbing effect as the air-brakes went down on their hinges. The Swordfish tried to burble an ! get its nose up again, but Hetheridge rammed her down hard—and swallowed.

"One of them is gettin' away, sir!" yelled Cockles, ratcheting the gun-mounting over again. "She's leaving the mooring!"

Below, the Italian cruiser was belching smoke and throwing an inky screen across the jetty. It swirled off the fronts of the quayside sheds, and billowed back over the second vessel moored near by.

Cockles back-heeled his seat up and swung his guns so that they were pointing over the top plane. He braced his feet against the pilot's seat support; his knobby hands clutched the release-latch. He beamed in anticipation.

A Swordfish with "E7G" painted on the fuselage identification-band slammed past them with a scream of baffled slipstream pressure. She was going down almost vertically, and Hetheridge felt his belly-band go limp.

"That's Matcham! He'll rip her to—"

"You're overshooting, sir!" raged Cockles, pouring a long burst into a roof-spotting station. "You're overshooting!"

Hetheridge couldn't keep his mind off Matcham and the two nymphs. Cockles was screaming his lungs out about Matcham. . . . Matcham was trying to win the war off his own bat, going down like that. Wanted to get it over and get a leave, to see that kid who made slides with the lard. Meant a hell of a pull-out. The fool had heaps of room all across the channel. With two nippers—nymphs, too!

"You're overshooting, sir!" bellowed Cockles again. "There goes Matcham . . . . . Oooo-o-o-er!"

Hetheridge stiffened against the dive tempest and muttered: "I'll put it up to Matcham when we get back. Those kids—"

An eruption below bashed a tumultuous cushion of blast air up at them, and the plane staggered like a skiff that has plunged heedlessly into a steamer swell. That hiked the wing line off the cruiser, and they were accelerating wildly for a group of sheds whose roofs glinted in the glare.

"You've overshot, sir!" Cockles raged as he punctuated the words with short bursts over the side at the pier-head gun-crew that was firing ebulliently over open sights and rifling H.E. at the section of Fairey Fulmars.

HETHERIDGE eased the Swordfish out carefully and whipped her over to come around again. He was cursing himself for his failure to get rid of the damned torp, when Cockles slapped him twice on the shoulder.

"Look! Look, sir! Matcham's lorst 'is wing—just like you said, sir!"

Hetheridge's kite came around and started up the chute again, the prop screaming a mad cacophony of frustration. The ear-splitting tympani of the guns below provided a set of discordant coronachs for the splintering finish that came to Matcham. His Swordfish, dragging a collapsed wing, lurched over on its back, rammed its nose down and went headlong into the roof of the wharf-shed.

"Matcham! Matcham!" yelled Hetheridge. "I told you about that wing, Matcham!"

"'E's gorn, sir! 'E's gorn," wailed the Cockney gunner. Then he added with a tone of rebuke: "But 'e put one in that Woppo at the jetty!"

"Those poor kids—the nymphs," Hetheridge said quietly.

"You will 'ave a go, won't you, sir?" pleaded Cockles. "You will 'ave a go?"

"Those poor little nippers!" Hetheridge was saying as he came around again. "We'll have a try. . . . Mullion Cove and lard slides on the deck—"

There was another muffled explosion, and the torpedo-bomber danced on a volcanic storm of concussion. Hetheridge tipped his wing down and peered over. Something wailed past them, and he saw Reg Rollins zoom up into the sky.

"Mr. Rollins 'as got one 'ome, sir!" yelled Cockles.

"A nymph?"

"No sir! I mean Mister Rollins 'as slapped one into that blighter wot's trying to get away!"

"Oh! Good show, Rollins!" Hetheridge clacked into his flap-mike. "Get into the cover of those Fulmars—and beat it!"

"Straight in the bloody engine-room!" Rollins was bellowing. "I'll bet that plugged his oil-can!"

A Fulmar hammering on the tail of a Fiat slashed across Hetheridge's course, his guns cutting a wing away, and blasting chunks of aileron all over the sky.

"She's trying to get across the channel for a beachin'!" Cockles cried. "They're trying to beach her, sir!"

He waited to pour a spray of Kynochs across the blue, and made a colander of a Mess-up's engine cowling. The Jerry floundered, nosed down, lowered his wheels and slithered along the top of a wharf-roof and wiped off a spotting-tower.

"You will 'ave a go, won't you, sir?" Cockles pleaded again. "You won't break it this time, will you?"

"I'll have a go at it," Hetheridge agreed solemnly.

Below, the big cruiser, belching smoke and jetting steam, appeared to have sufficient headway to cross the channel and get to the beach on the other side. They were making a game effort to salvage her on the shallow sands not many cable-lengths away.

"Of course I'll have a go! What do you think we came for? Can't go back with a torp between our wheels. Might as well use the damn' thing!"

"But you won't slip 'er orf wrong and break 'er back, will you?" Cockles implored, ramming on two more ammo drums. "Don't break the torp, sir!"

"Shut up! I won't break her. I want to see what a Woppo cruiser looks like with her screws shining in the sun. This one will be for Matcham's nippers—the nymphs."

"The who, sir?" asked Cockles.

But the Swordfish was on her way down now. The wind was screeching against the flap-brakes, and throaty

hellions were taunting them through the slug-slits and shrapnel punctures. The pompoms from the *Turin's* port rail apertures were whanging Breda-Safat slugs at them in a steady thunderous stream. The Swordfish shouldered into the fury and bucked the uneven pressure. A belch of stack heat hurled a bolster of interference at them, and she almost went over on her back.

"Don't be short this time, sir. Don't hoik her too soon, or you'll break 'er!" yelled Cockles, reaching down for the short stubby brass device near his knee.

Hetheridge nodded shortly. "I'll show you what they look like on their backs with the screws showing!" raged the Flying Officer.

"I'm quite sure you will," agreed Cockles, wrenching the fire-extinguisher out of its bracket.

Hetheridge jockeyed the Swordfish into position and peered along the blue line painted across the windscreen. He steadied her again and stiffened against the rudder pedals and reached for the cradle release. She was in a shallow dive, riding full into the inferno of Ack-Ack fire, when Cockles brought the fire-extinguisher down with a solid *thock*.

COCKLES climbed up, hooked his heels under the gun-mounting and reached in and took over. He held her firm and reached for the torpedo release, and slammed the Swordfish full tilt at the crippled *Turin*. He rammed Hetheridge's head to one side and hung on until the last possible second, then yanked the release with his left hand and the control stick with his right.

She curled up, her wing-tip almost pivoting on the rim of the *Turin's* funnel. Cockles, his helmet almost blown from his head, glanced back and saw a white line racing through the rollers to a point just under the cruiser's fore-turret.

Bong!

The bow appeared to lift itself clear of the water. A giant corsage of green and white foliage blossomed up from under the rail, and then a gush of flame seared it to a chalkened spray which fell back clambering for a grip on the deck.

"There's one for *your* nippers to talk abart," said Cockles, sliding back off Hetheridge's shoulders as the Swordfish zoomed up into the blue.

He hung there, steadying the stick as the torpedo-bomber did a series of aileron circuits of the harbor, until he was able to slap Mr. 'Etheridge back into consciousness. . . .

The Englishman came out of it and clutched wildly at everything in the cockpit. He pawed over Cockles' arm, and finally sensed that he held the stick. He looked over gingerly to figure their height, and then saw the *Turin* on her back with her screws showing!

"What happened?" he asked with a parched voice.

"You did it beautifully, sir! She never 'ad a charnst!" explained Cockles. "The Fulmars are over there."

"But I don't remember a thing."

"Well sir, if I may say so, you did act a bit like you was—er—*totally oblivious* of what you were up to," beamed Cockles, lowering his seat with grim satisfaction.

Hetheridge looked over again and saw the result, and then rubbed the back of his head and closed his eyes.

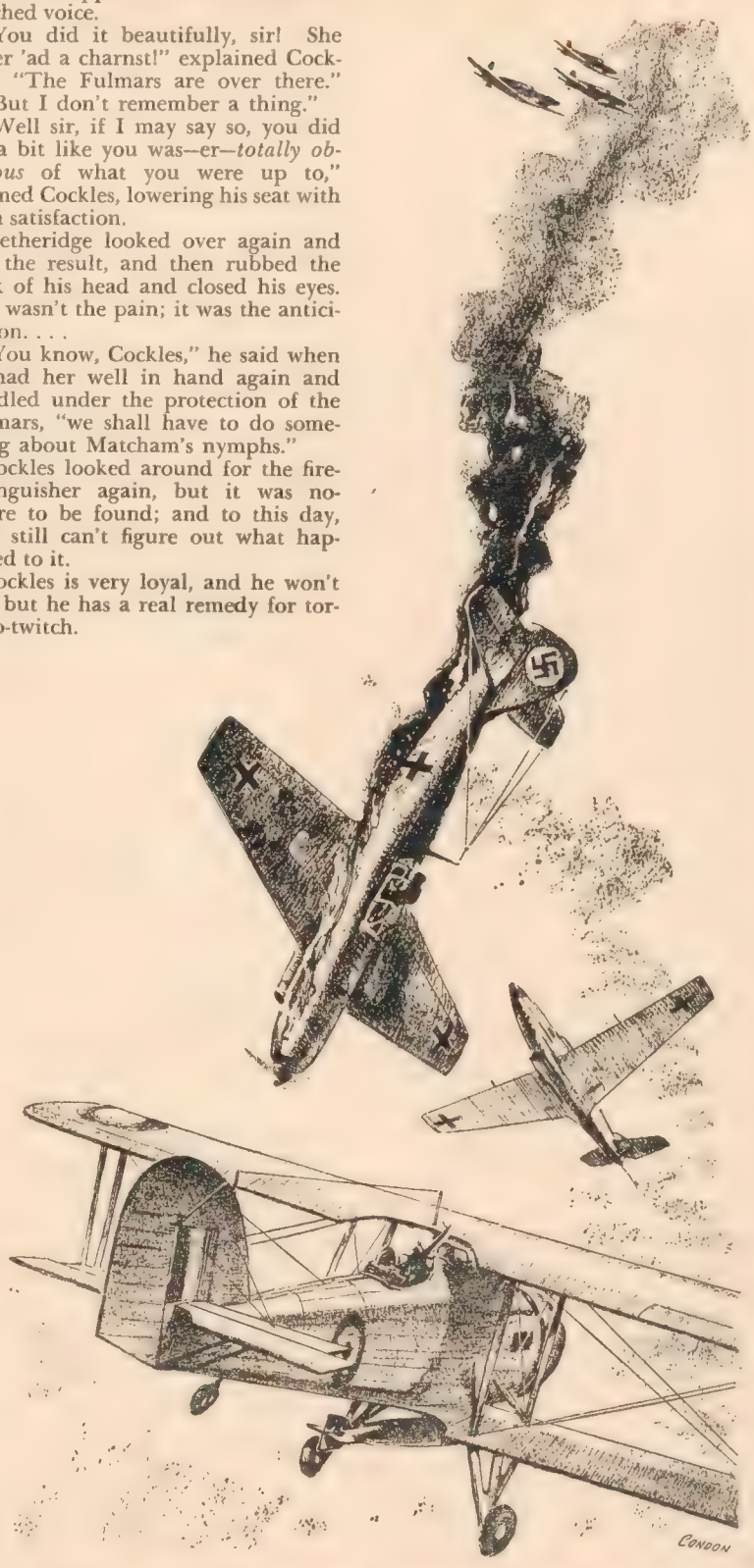
It wasn't the pain; it was the anticipation. . . .

"You know, Cockles," he said when he had her well in hand again and huddled under the protection of the Fulmars, "we shall have to do something about Matcham's nymphs."

Cockles looked around for the fire-extinguisher again, but it was nowhere to be found; and to this day, they still can't figure out what happened to it.

Cockles is very loyal, and he won't tell, but he has a real remedy for torpedo-twitch.

Illustrated by Grattan Condon



Hell in specialized packets was being detonated up there.

RIDE TO

The able author of "Bang It Out of Town" here gives us a detective novelette with the colorful background of a carnival.

DESPITE the cloudless Vermont sky, Mr. Julius wore a long brown raincoat which flapped around his ankles. It covered an old-fashioned belted Norfolk jacket and knee-tight knickerbockers, his spindling legs encased in gray angora golf stockings. He leaned forward, cap pulled down over his faded blue eyes, chin resting on the bone handle of his umbrella. From the pocket of the raincoat a black metal ear-trumpet protruded.

The ear-trumpet may have explained his apparent indifference to the clamor that went on around him. Eight racing cars went roaring past, to barrel into the turn of the half-mile dirt track below him. From behind the grandstand where he sat came the symphony of sounds from a country fair-grounds midway—the voices of barkers in front of concessions, brassy through loud-speakers; the sour off-key music of a merry-go-round; the droning voice of the bingo maestro as he endlessly arranged and rearranged the positions of beans on little white cards. Most penetrating of all was the intermittent banshee wail of a siren, attached to a motorcycle which a girl in white satin pants rode frantically round and round on the perpendicular walls of a tank-shaped motordrome.

Across the track was a platform where vaudeville was performed between races. A man was setting up apparatus there, and Mr. Julius saw what was coming. Trained poodles. He had a terrible weakness for animal exhibits —and especially for trick dogs.

He looked around him to be sure he wasn't watched, reached into the right-hand pocket of his raincoat and withdrew a box of crackerjack. He munched contentedly.

He saw the smash coming, seconds before it happened. He had had his eyes on the silver car which audaciously bore the number 13. The driver had been forced into the pits several laps back and lost his position in the race. Since returning to the track, he had been driving like a maniac, taking breathless risks on the unbanked turns, fighting doggedly to get back into competition. He had worked his way into second position when it happened.

The pack raced past the grandstand, Number 13 directly on the heels of scarlet Number 4. As Number 4 gunned his motor to skid into the turn, the front wheel of Number 13's car locked with his hind wheels. There was a horrified catching of breath in a thousand throats, and the red car rose upward, somersaulted twice, and crashed through the outer guard-rail. The body of the driver went hurtling through the air like a flopping sawdust dummy. With a blast of explosion the red car burst into flame.

Number 13 had broken through the inside rail into the infield and rolled over on its back. Its four wheels spun lazily. People from everywhere streamed toward the two

NOWHERE

by HUGH PENTECOST

cars. An official ran out on the track and was frantically yellow-flagging the other drivers. A hearse, used in this rural district for an ambulance, lumbered out onto the track.

Mr. Julius watched the scene for a moment, sitting motionless as the driver of Number 13 climbed slowly out from beneath his wrecked machine. He took off his helmet and goggles and began to limp toward the wreckage of Number 4.

A mechanic in overalls hurried up to Number 13, grabbed him by the shoulders, spoke to him earnestly. Number 13 shook himself free. Mr. Julius could almost hear him saying: "I'm all right. Let me alone."

Then Mr. Julius got up and made his way down the aisle to the track. Even he could hear the screaming of the woman who stood in the forefront of the crowd near the hearse.

"Carl Benton's wife," somebody said. "Looks like his number is up."

Mr. Julius elbowed his way to the inside of the circle. Carl Benton, Number 4, had been lifted onto a stretcher and was being carried to the hearse. Then the screaming woman saw Number 13 and his mechanic.

"You lead-foot devil!" she cried. "You didn't care for anyone but yourself. You didn't give a damn what happened to Carl! Why couldn't it have been you?"

She flew at Number 13, clawing at his face. He stood motionless, hands at his sides, as her nails ripped into his cheeks. Then the mechanic pulled her away, and somebody took her off to ride in the hearse with her husband.

There was a hurt, almost hunted look in Number 13's eyes as he turned away. He took only a few steps before he halted. Then Mr. Julius saw the man who looked like Disraeli—Disraeli in gray flannels and a plaid sports jacket of swanky cut. He looked at Number 13 with a sardonic smile on his lips.

"If it isn't Buck Lawson!" he said.

Buck Lawson raised his hand to blot at the little trickle of blood on his cheek.

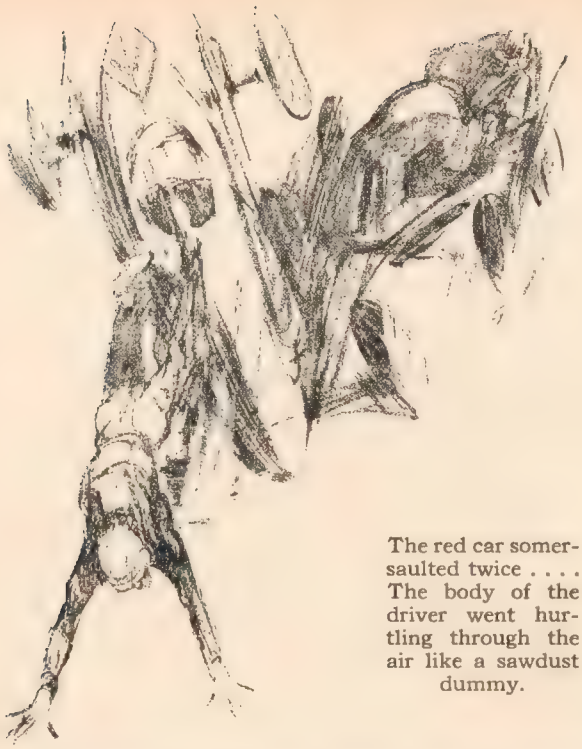
"I am surprised to find you in this racket," said Disraeli. "A man of your great talents."

"Look, Thayler," Lawson said unsteadily, "you better keep moving."

"Fighting for the Chinese or some other Rover Boy cause," Disraeli said, "would have been my guess."

The siren shrieked. The raucous babel of the midway continued unabated. Yet apparently these two men thought themselves quite alone. Lawson took a step forward, his fists doubled. Disraeli held his ground.

"Ah, yes, your honor, Lawson!" he said softly. "You must defend your precious honor."



The red car somersaulted twice . . . . The body of the driver went hurtling through the air like a sawdust dummy.

The mechanic tried to drag Lawson back. Suddenly Disraeli found himself confronted by a pair of frosty blue eyes, a flapping raincoat, a menacing umbrella.

"Go away," said Mr. Julius.

"My dear sir," said Disraeli, "aren't you interfering in something which is no concern of yours?"

"Always do," said Mr. Julius. "Fatal weakness. Scram. This boy—suffering from shock. Any fool can see that. Want to be pulverized? Take a tip: Go away before you get mussed up."

Disraeli looked past Mr. Julius at Lawson. "Perhaps I will go. I don't like the company."

"Mutual feeling," said Mr. Julius. "Good-by." He turned his back on Disraeli and faced Lawson and the mechanic. "You need a drink," he said. "On *me*." He pointed his umbrella at the mechanic. "Your name?"

The mechanic looked startled. "Casey," he said. "Fred Casey. Why didn't you let Buck do a job on that rat?"

"Why didn't *you?*" said Mr. Julius. "Get moving."

IN the Quality Bar and Grill on Chanford's main street, Mr. Julius, Buck Lawson and Fred Casey sat down in a corner booth. A waitress stood by for an order.

"Scotch and soda," said Lawson dully.

"Make it two," said Casey.

"Three Scotch and plain water," said Mr. Julius. "Soda spoils the taste." He leaned back, planting his cap and ear-trumpet on the edge of the table. "Well, young man, why do you want to die?"

Fred Casey, a black Irishman of about fifty, shook his head. "Grandpop, I think you're nuts. Not that I aint grateful for the drink."

"Nobody who cared about living would drive a car the way you do," said Mr. Julius, ignoring Casey. "What's eating you?"

Lawson laughed shortly. "What's all this to you?"

"Professional kibitzer," said Mr. Julius. "Disease. Can't mind my own business, especially when I see murder in a man's eyes. Saw it in yours. Cool off, my friend, or you'll hang some Friday. It can't be that bad."

"You think not?"

"That Thayler. Who is he? Can't hurt you. He's soft. Got a soul curled up inside him like a snake. You're young. Got places to go."

"That's where you're wrong," Buck Lawson said. He lifted his highball. "I'm going nowhere, Mr. Julius, and Thayler is the reason why."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Julius. "Nobody can stop you going places. You've got nerve. Feelings. Saw that when you let that woman claw you."

Dark anger rose up in Lawson's eyes. "You don't think I like driving this dirt-track circuit at these one-horse fairs, do you? You don't think I like risking my neck for coffee and cakes?"

"Then why do it?"

The end of Buck Lawson's cigarette glowed red. "I'll tell you why," he said, "if you're honing to know. Because Sebastian Thayler has hounded me. For four years he's kept me from my kind of work. I was a flyer; a damn' good commercial pilot. But no more. Thayler put the bee on me. Blacklisted, license revoked; no chance for a hearing or an appeal."

"Why?" Mr. Julius asked.

"The hell with it, Buck!" Casey said. "They's no use in openin' up. It only makes you crazy mad."

Mr. Julius shrugged. "Not my business. But you can't live with bile in your blood. Suffocates you. There are laws against persecution."

Lawson laughed bitterly. "So a two-for-a-nickel dirt track race-driver can get the law to operate against a big shot like Sebastian Thayler, with all the dough in Hollywood behind him? He's the most famous director in pictures. They've got him covered like a tent."

"There are laws," Mr. Julius persisted. "Better talk to my friend Bradlen. He's with me here—vacation."

"Bradlen?" Lawson repeated.

"Police Inspector. Homicide's his racket—New York City. But he knows about these things."

Lawson shook his head. "Laws aren't made for people like us. When I saw Thayler at the fair yesterday, I ducked him. I was afraid of what I might do if we tangled. I've got to keep ducking him. You saw what happened this afternoon."

"I ought to of let you put the slug on him," Casey said doggedly. "What could you of lost?"

"Your dinner and his," said a voice at Mr. Julius' elbow. "You have to win those tin-can derbies to eat."

MR. JULIUS turned to squint up at a girl who had approached the booth unnoticed. He had seen her before. She wore a white satin shirt and riding-breeches and patent-leather boots. A worn polo coat was thrown over this costume. Her blonde hair was cut in a shoulder-length bob, and though she could not have been over twenty-five there were the beginnings of hard lines at the corners of her eyes. These, Mr. Julius decided, were caused by the intense concentration required in her job. It was this young woman who rode the motorcycle around the perpendicular walls of the motordrome.

"Hello, Jill," Lawson said. "This is Mr. Julius—Miss Mason."

"Sit down," said Mr. Julius.

"Sorry, but I work for a living." She turned to Lawson. "You're all right, Buck? Not hurt?"

"Sore in a few places," Lawson said. "Colonel Thorne will raise hell with you for leaving the fair-grounds."

"It's my concession," said the girl. "I'm the one who's losing by it. I had a hunch you'd be here crying into your beer."

Lawson's color deepened. "Now look, Jill—"

"There are a couple of hundred souvenir-hunters taking hunks out of that wreck of yours, Buck. If you and Fred don't get back there, there won't be enough of it left to sell for junk."

Fred Casey got quickly to his feet. "I'll go, Buck."

Lawson fiddled with a cigarette, not looking at the girl, who still stood by the booth. "It was Thayler," he said. "He made some cracks after the smash-up. If it hadn't been for Mr. Julius here, I might have settled my account with him."

"All you need to make things just dandy is to serve a jail term for beating up that lug," the girl said. "You've got a job, Buck. Every day that car of yours is laid up, you don't work. For Pete's sake, use your bean."

Slowly Lawson stood up. "I don't know why you bother with me, Jill."

"There you've got me," said Jill Mason. She turned to Mr. Julius. "Thanks, old-timer. We don't encounter too many white men in this racket." Then her voice hardened. "And if you happen to see Thayler at the hotel where you're staying, tell him show-people have a way of sticking together. Tell him to stay away."

THE Equinox House in Chanford is typical of New England resort hotels. The rambling old building has a white-pillared front. Its porches face the shaded main street. It differs mainly from other hotels of its type in its clientele. Chanford is a golfing Mecca, and there are fewer old ladies rocking on the porches than at most summer places. But there are rocking-chairs, customarily set in rows along the marble sidewalk in front of the hotel. In one of these sat Mr. Julius, watching a silver moon rise up over the line of hills.

In the lobby a red-headed man in sloppy tweeds paused at the cigar-counter to buy himself a tin of tobacco. He was about thirty-six or -seven, with a face more deeply lined than would have been expected at his age; but there was nothing hard about his expression.

A small boy of twelve approached him, as he stood filling a pipe from the tin.

"Pardon me, sir," the boy said, "but aren't you Mr. Luke Bradlen?"

Luke Bradlen smiled. "That's right, son."

"Gee," said the boy. "I wonder if you'd—if you'd mind giving me your autograph."

"If you insist, son. But there are a lot of famous people around here whose autographs would really be worth something."

"I guess," said the boy, "if you don't mind, I'd rather have yours, sir."

Bradlen took the pencil and notebook the boy handed him and signed his name. The boy thanked him and ran off. Bradlen got his pipe going, strolled out onto the sidewalk and sat down in the chair next to Mr. Julius.

"Win any kewpie dolls this afternoon?" he asked.

"Phooey!" said Mr. Julius. "When a grown man wastes his substance chasing a little white ball around in the bushes—"

Bradlen looked down at blistered hands and sighed. "I get to that damned seventh hole each day with a pretty good score—and then the roof falls in."

"While you've been indulging in a stupid game," said Mr. Julius, "I've been seeing life! Nice kid—life ruined—facing death every afternoon in an antediluvian clunker. Heat put on him by an autocratic demagogue."

Bradlen leaned back in his chair, eyes half closed, puffing contentedly at his pipe. "I know you're going to tell me about it, Julius, so you might as well begin at the beginning."

"Humph! Where else *would* I begin?"

Bradlen listened to the story of Buck Lawson, the accident, the account of his persecution at the hands of Sebastian Thayler.

"Thayler's one of Hollywood's top-flight directors," Bradlen said. "You've seen scores of his pictures."

"Haven't seen a new picture in fifteen years," snapped Mr. Julius. "Can't hear!"

Bradlen smiled to himself. He knew that Mr. Julius' hearing was remarkably acute when the occasion demanded.

"Ought to be a place for a boy like Lawson," said Mr. Julius. "Got stuff, but it's curdled on him. No opening. Those crackpots in Washington—"

"Time!" said Bradlen mildly. "We made an agreement. We don't talk about politics or crime on this vacation."

"Which leaves your mind a void," snapped the old man. "You don't know anything else."

"Relax," said Bradlen. "You know you're having a good time prying around into the lives of your pathological misfits."

Mr. Julius sat forward in his chair and peered into the gloom. "Speaking of misfits, here's one of 'em now!"

A vintage model Franklin touring-car had pulled up to the curbing just behind a glittering Rolls. Fred Casey got out of the car and looked anxiously at the dinner-coated guests in the chairs along the pavement. Then he saw Mr. Julius and came toward him. Fred had cleaned himself up. He wore a pair of faded gray slacks and a blue work-shirt open at the throat. His black hair had been doused with water and slicked back. Bradlen thought he had a good deal of Irish charm, except that his blue eyes, which should have been laughing, were somber.

Fred halted by Mr. Julius' chair. "God, I'm glad I found you, Mr. Julius."

"I'm not in hiding," snapped the old man. "What is it?"

"I got no right to ask any favors," Fred said, "but we're in a hell of a mess. The worst mess we could of got into. I figured maybe your friend—" He looked past Mr. Julius to Bradlen.

"This is Fred Casey," Mr. Julius said. "Inspector Bradlen. What's Thayler done now?"

Casey's fingers trembled as he fumbled with a package of cigarettes. "He's dead, Mr. Julius. Murdered. They're holding Buck."

Behind them a woman laughed. It wasn't ordinary laughter. It rose hysterically. Bradlen had a glimpse of her, slender and dark, a white evening wrap drawn around her shoulders, before she turned and ran into the hotel.

"I pulled a boner," Fred said. "That's Thayler's wife."

WHEN the bright spotlight of notoriety chose to blaze on Bub Heywood and Nellie Waters, they were two country kids in their teens. Bub was a farmhand, and Nellie worked for some of the summer folks.

The fair was their big outing of the year. They saved dimes and nickels and pennies for the one night when they'd eat miraculous foods, squander their money on the lay-down gambling games, gawk at girl-shows, ride in the Ferris wheel and hold hands tightly as they were momentarily alone, high above the crowd.

About nine-thirty, which was late for them, they had exhausted the possibilities of the midway and also their finances. But they were happy. Nellie had a *Pinocchio* doll tucked under one arm. Bub was feeding himself from a paper bag of freshly buttered popcorn.

"We never had no idea we was in for anythin' when we went up the water-tower!" Bub was to say that a thousand times as he told and retold his story.

The tower rose seventy-five feet in the air just south of the grandstand. A winding iron stairway ended in a balcony which circled the tank. From that vantage-point Bub and Nellie could see not only the whole of the fairgrounds spread out below them, but also the fireworks which were being set off inside the race-track.

The climb to the top for the view took their breath away. After a time Bub leaned on the inside rail and looked down into the water. The edge of the tank came chest-high on Bub. He saw ripples on the black surface of the water. Then, just as he was about to turn away, a magnificent rocket went off overhead and exploded into a hundred cascading flares. Bub made a choking sound.

"God almighty, there's—there's a man in there, Nellie!" he stammered. "I seen him in the water!"

Nellie screamed and ran down the iron stairway with Bub hot at her heels.

"There's a drowned man in the tank!" she cried.

SHERIFF RUFUS BURNS was at a booth about thirty feet from the tower. Burns was a tall, raw-boned farmer, with the fine, aristocratic contours of face typical of so many native Vermonters. His eyes were clear, pale blue, and concentrated at the moment on a pin-ball game.

The Sheriff heard Nellie scream and was indignant. Being Sheriff at fair-time certainly cut into his fun. Somebody was always making a fuss. He ambled over to the tower, where Bub was saying over and over: "A man in the water —floatin' in the water!"

The Sheriff glanced at the iron stair. No one seemed anxious to go up. "You musta been seein' things, Bub," he said. "I'll just have a look."

He climbed the tower and looked over the edge into the water. He couldn't see anything. Kid must be liquored up, he thought. He heard other people coming up the tower. He was about to turn away when someone turned a torch down onto the water. It was Speed Watson, hawk-eyed, shrewd-faced, an unlighted cigarette bobbing in one corner of his mouth. Speed was fixer for the Colonel Thorne Mammoth Shows. It was his job to see that nothing interrupted the smooth running of the performance, or halted the steady flow of money into the cash registers.

There were half a dozen other show-hands on the balcony as Speed's torch illuminated the surface of the water.

"There he is," someone said.

They lowered a man over the edge, hanging onto his heels. He groped in the water and finally seized the dead man by the coat collar. Other hands reached to help, and the dripping body was lifted clear onto the platform.

"God!" said Speed. "It's Thayler, the movie director!"

There is one unalterable rule of the circus or carnival business. Nothing must happen, neither tornado, nor flood, nor murder itself, to keep the show from moving on to its next booking. One day's lay-off spells headache. A huge pay-roll to meet, and nothing coming in. Speed didn't have to tell these show-people, who stood looking down into Sebastian Thayler's dead face, that a murder investigation might hold them here for days. One of the men was trying artificial respiration, but it was no good.

"Get him down to the office wagon," Speed ordered. "That's okay with you, isn't it, Sheriff? We don't want a panic."

The only panic visible at that moment was in Rufus Burns' eyes. Murder! Hell, he didn't have the first notion about how to handle such a thing.

Speed Watson hadn't waited for an answer. Men carried the body down the stairway, with Speed leading the way. "It's all right, folks," he told the crowd. "Just a little accident. He's going to be okay. Let 'em through, please."

At the foot of the stairs waited a huge pot-bellied old man wearing a wide sombrero. He had a white mustache and goatee reminiscent of Buffalo Bill. He was Colonel Thorne, owner of the show.

"What is it, Speed?" he demanded.

Speed spoke under his breath, his eyes shifting quickly over the crowd for signs of trouble. "Thayler. Dead as a mackerel."

"He fell in the tank?"

"You can't fall in," Speed said. "Rail's too high."

"THERE'S nothing I can do to help you, Casey," Bradlen said.

"I'd sure hate to see Buck railroaded," Fred said, looking down at his grease-packed nails.

Bradlen was patient. "I haven't any authority here. They have their own machinery for dealing with things. They wouldn't want me to interfere."

"That's the trouble," Fred said. "They haven't. The Sheriff's a good-enough guy, but he's way out over his head. Local dairy farmer. Never had anythin' worse to handle than pinchin' a drunk or a little petty larceny around town. The State cops is strictly highway patrol around here. They got a sort of special dick at Montpelier that handles cases like this, but it turns out he's on some bank-robbery job that's took him out of the State. That leaves it to Burns, the Sheriff. With Speed Watson and the Colonel anxious to make sure they don't get held up here, they don't give a damn who takes the rap. Buck's the fall guy."

Bradlen glanced sideways at Fred's square-set profile. "You're pretty sold on Lawson."

"He's a good guy, Mr. Bradlen. Kind of soured on things, but a good guy. I run into him in '37 at the Syracuse fair. He was lone-wolfin' it then. Didn't have no greaseball. He didn't even have no friends. We decided to hook up, and every cent he's took in drivin', he's split fifty-fifty with me."

"And when you've gone hungry, you've split that with him. Is that the picture, Fred?"

"I guess it is," Casey said. "Mr. Bradlen, if they push him around for this, it'll be just too bad. A guy can only stand so much."

Mr. Julius stamped his foot impatiently. "No use talking to him, Casey. He's a cop. Cops don't have hearts."

"A dollar looks as big as a bed-sheet to us right now, Mr. Bradlen," Casey said earnestly. "But if you'd help us—"

"I'm not a private detective, Fred." Bradlen was rueful. "This is my vacation, you know. Why are they holding Lawson?"

Casey looked at Mr. Julius. "You heard the way he talked about Thayler this afternoon. You aint the only one he talked to."

"Have they got anything on him?" Bradlen asked.

"I don't know. But right away Speed Watson and Colonel Thorne told this hick Sheriff how Buck felt about Thayler. I don't think they've got anything against Buck, but they want it cleaned up quick so there won't be no hitch in their bangin' out tomorrow night."

Bradlen drew a deep breath and slipped his pipe into the pocket of his coat. "Tell me exactly what happened, Fred."

Casey told him how Bub Heywood and Nellie Waters had found the body, and how it had been removed to the office wagon. "The doctor examined the body. There was a bruise on the jaw like somebody slugged him—slugged him and then tipped him over into the water. Not another mark on him. The punch wasn't enough to knock him cold, or else the water brought him to. He must of thrashed around in there for quite a while before he drowned. Sides are all slime. No way to get out."

"Great Scott, he had a voice, didn't he?" Mr. Julius said. "Didn't he call for help?"

"You've been to the fair, Mr. Julius."

The three men were silent. Voices barking through loud-speakers, canned music, the shrieking siren of the motordrome. A man could yell his head off inside that water-tank, his fingers clutching despairingly at its smooth sides, and not be heard.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Mr. Julius demanded.

They drove to the fair-grounds in the old Franklin. Fred brought it to a jolting stop in the parking field. There were still hundreds of country people milling along the midway, playing the games, gawking at the sideshow exhibits, patronizing the rides. There were lights everywhere, and four illuminating towers that kept the midway bright as daylight.

"The office wagon's down to the other end," Fred said.

Bradlen and Mr. Julius followed him. Bradlen was conscious of smells; the shavings underfoot, underdone hot-dogs and fried onions, the pungence of gunpowder from the shooting-gallery. And he was conscious of something

else—a guarded scrutiny from all the people connected with the show. The word had got around.

As they came abreast the motordrome, Bradlen halted. On a platform outside the drome stood Jill Mason in her white regalia, an aviator's helmet with goggles pulled over her blonde hair. A barker stood beside her, his grating voice holding the crowd.

"And this little lady will not only defy the laws of gravity by riding at sixty miles an hour on the straight up-and-down walls of this drome you see here, but she will risk being rended limb from limb by a savage jungle beast, waiting hungrily on the floor of the drome for her to fall. And finally, most amazing of all, ladies and gentlemen, she will drive a specially constructed car on these perpendicular walls with this same savage beast as a passenger, protected only by a thin wire screen. You may have seen drome riders before, ladies and gentlemen, but until you have seen this little lady perform, you have seen nothing. For only ten cents, the tenth part of a dollar—"

Bradlen saw that the girl's eyes were fixed on him. She made a gesture with a white-gauntleted hand indicating that she wanted to talk to him. Bradlen pushed his way through the crowd until he reached the platform. Mr. Julius and Casey were at his heels. Jill Mason dropped down on one knee to ask:

"You're the homicide dick from New York?"

"That's right, Miss Mason."

"You're working for Buck?"

"I wouldn't put it that way, Miss Mason. If the Sheriff will accept assistance, I'll be working for him; to find the murderer."

"Buck didn't do it," Jill said. "You see, I know."

"You know?"

JILL lowered her voice so that it was almost a whisper: "I saw the murderer."

"Mercy!" said Bradlen. "That would seem to end the case."

"But I don't know who it was," Jill said. She turned her head to the barker. "Keep spieling for a minute or two, Bill. . . . I saw Thayler go up the tower," she continued to Bradlen. "I—I was looking for him. Never mind why at the moment. I was just going to follow him up, when I saw there was someone else on the balcony. So I waited. I couldn't see who it was, because the balcony is above the level of the lights. Just a shadow. But it wasn't Buck. I'd have known him even in the dark."

"What makes you think the person you saw was the murderer?"

Jill's eyes met Bradlen's unblinkingly. "Because he never came down from the tower."

"I don't get it," said Bradlen, flatly.

"I waited for Thayler at the bottom of the steps," Jill said. "I wanted to talk to him alone. Those two kids went up while I was there. They found Thayler. Nobody had come down. The murderer was hiding up there while those kids were there."

Bradlen said: "You must have waited a long time. A man doesn't drown in a minute."

"It was about half an hour," Jill said.

"What did you want to see Thayler about?"

"That is strictly personal."

Bradlen reached for his pipe and began to fill it. He didn't take his eyes from the girl's face. "As I understand it, those kids found the body and sounded the alarm. A lot of people went up the tower then. The murderer simply mingled with them?"

"That's the way it must have been. Because he never came down."

"Have you told the Sheriff this?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Her voice didn't waver. "Because Buck was one of the people who went up the tower."

"Go away," said Mr. Julius, "before you get mussed up."

"Did you see him go up?" Bradlen inquired sharply.

"Yes."

"Then that puts him in the clear."

Jill shook her head. "Speed would twist it around. Speed has it in for Buck. He'd say I was just trying to protect him."

"What has Speed got against Buck?"

The girl's lips tightened.

"I've been Speed Watson's girl for nearly five years."

"Now you have bewildered me," said Bradlen mildly. "I thought that you and Lawson—"

"Buck is just a friend. I guess Fred and I are the only friends he's got. I won't see him framed just to get this lousy outfit moving on to its next stop without a hitch."

Bradlen struck a match and held it to the bowl of his pipe. He squinted through the flame at Jill. "Have you told anyone else you saw the murderer?"

"No."

"Don't," said Bradlen. "The murderer might not know just how bad your vision was."

"I'm not afraid."

"Not being afraid," said Bradlen, "is hardly a form of life-insurance."

The barker tapped Jill on the shoulder. "You'd better get to work, toots. The rubes are getting restless."

"I'll see you later, Miss Mason." Then Bradlen smiled. "You wouldn't try to kid a city slicker, would you? You did see Buck go up the tower *after* the body was found?"

Jill seemed to make a snap decision. "No, I *didn't* see him," she said. "The girl was hysterical. I was trying to help quiet her. I didn't notice who went up."

"But you saw him come down?"

"He helped carry the body."

"Then he *could* have been—"

"No!" said Jill sharply. "It just *can't* be that way!"

"Thanks for telling me the truth, Jill. But don't talk about what you saw. It's not safe. After I've seen the Sheriff, we can try to make sense out of this." He turned to Julius and Fred. "Come on."

Sebastian Thayler

Sheriff Burns turned out to be a pushover. Knowing the Vermont temperament, Bradlen expected the Sheriff to resent interference, and he was mentally girding himself for a skirmish when he got one of the canvasmen who was lolling outside the red office-wagon to take in his card.

The Sheriff appeared at once. He came down the steps straight to Bradlen.

"Inspector Bradlen?"

"That's right, Sheriff. This is my friend, Mr. Julius."

"Glad to make your acquaintance. And say, I'm mighty glad you showed up, Inspector." Burns' calloused hand crushed Bradlen's. His eyes were troubled. "Fact is, I was jest goin' to send a feller out huntin' fer you."

Bradlen's eyebrows raised.

"Guess you aint used to a small town, Inspector," Burns chuckled. "I knowed, twenty minutes after you'd registered up to the hotel, that you was a police officer from the city. Read about a couple of your cases in the Sunday magazine."

"I heard your State man wasn't available," Bradlen said. "I thought perhaps—"

"I guess if you hadn't of offered, Inspector, I'd have come a-crawlin'. Let's step over here and talk a minute, on account of I got a suspect in the wagon yonder."

"Lawson?"

"You know about him?"

"Something. What have you got on him, Sheriff?"

Burns tugged at the lapel of his coat. "Fact is, we aint got a thing on him 'ceptin' talk. Seems he had a grudge against this Thayler, but they aint no evidence, as I can see. Still, I don't figger to let him git away till I'm certain."

"But you let everybody else on the grounds leave when they want to," snapped Mr. Julius.

"Well, now, I don't rightly know how I can stop 'em."

"Are you quite certain this is a murder case?" Bradlen asked. "As I understand it, the only sign of violence was a bruise on Thayler's chin. He could have got it falling. Perhaps he had a heart-attack and simply toppled into the water."

The Sheriff shook his head. "Take a look," he said. He pointed to the tower. "It's jest a ten-foot tank on a scaffoldin' to give us pressure in case of fire. When they built it, they figgered kids might git to foolin' around up there, maybe when there wasn't no fair goin' on nor no one 'bout. So they fixed it so the balcony is about four and a half feet below the rim of the tank. You couldn't just fall in. You'd have to be lifted up and *hove* in."

"I see."

"And Thayler wasn't unconscious when he was in the water. He was tryin' like hell to git out. He's got slime from the sides of the tank jammed under his fingernails. That don't sound like a heart-attack, does it?"

"You're wasting time," Mr. Julius fretted. "Of course he was murdered. In the cards. Only the good die naturally before their time."

"Now, aint that so!" said the Sheriff. "I've noticed it's always the no-accounts that—"

"What has Lawson to say for himself?" Bradlen cut in.

"Nothin', 'cept that we're tryin' to frame him."

"Alibi?"

"Same as most everyone else. He was somewhere around the grounds. Jest wanderin' around."

"Let's talk to him."

"Suits me. And I'm mighty grateful to you for helpin' us out, Inspector. If you'd like fer me to make you a deputy—"

"We can let that ride," said Bradlen.

THE red wagon was rigged up inside like an office; a roll-top desk and swivel-chair, a safe in one corner, two or three straight chairs. Tacked to the walls were posters, pictures of famous carnival performers and prize-fighters.

Colonel Thorne was seated in the swivel-chair smoking a crooked black stogie and tugging at his goatee. Buck Lawson sat in one of the chairs, a deputy close behind him. When Buck saw Mr. Julius, his mouth curled.

"So you dug up a big shot to help pin it on me," he said.

Bradlen's eyes were mild, but there was an edge to his voice. "It seems to me you've got yourself in quite enough trouble already by popping off, Lawson." He turned "You are Colonel Thorne?"

"That is eminently correct, sir," boomed the Colonel.

"The Sheriff has asked me to lend him a hand."

"We are to be congratulated, sir," said the Colonel. "You understand my position, I trust. A pay-roll of a hundred and eighty people to meet each and every Saturday. If we are delayed here, even for a day, it means disaster."

"So rather than lose a day, you'll hang the first man implicated. Is that the angle, Colonel Thorne?"

"Good Lord, sir, that's a sinister comment! This young fellow—"

"Did anyone see him do it?"

"Well, not exactly, sir. But he was here on the fairgrounds, and he—"

"Where were *you*, Colonel Thorne?"

"Me, sir?" The Colonel jumped as if Bradlen had stuck him with a pin. "Why, on the lot, of course, attending to my duties. Keeping an eye on things. If you are hinting that I killed Sebastian, you are being ridiculous, sir. Whereas this young man has kept his feelings no secret, and frankly, none of us is surprised that he finally—"

"How long had you known Thayler?"

"Well, sir, to tell the truth—"

"It would be advisable," said Bradlen.

"I *had* met him before," the Colonel admitted, wriggling in his chair. "I was managing a troupe on the Coast, and he engaged us to work in a picture. Ours was a most casual acquaintance, I assure you. I hardly knew him. I—"

"But well enough to call him by his first name."

"In show-business, Inspector, formalities are quickly cut through."

"So I notice. So quickly that without any formality at all, you plan to slap Lawson down on a murder charge without a shred of evidence."

"But sir, believe me—"

Bradlen turned his back on the Colonel. "You can't hold this boy, Sheriff, without something more tangible than gossip to bring against him."

"I reckon not," said Burns unhappily. "Only—"

"Until we know what questions to ask, there's no use holding anyone. I'd like to have a look at that water-tower, Sheriff."

There was really nothing to see at the tower. As Burns had pointed out, the barrier at the top was too high for anyone to have fallen in accidentally. Bradlen felt cold fingers run along his spine as the Sheriff's torch showed him the still black water. Before his eyes came a picture of Thayler, no longer suave and competent, helplessly clawing at those slimy sides and screaming for help.

"There aint much to git your teeth into," observed the Sheriff, "except the fact itself."

The two men clattered down the iron stairway. When they reached the bottom, Burns waited for Bradlen to give orders. The detective stood looking at the crowd milling along the midway, absently tapping his pipe in the palm of his hand. Finally Burns could stand the silence no longer.

"Where do you figger we catch a holt now, Inspector?"

"You've got a lot of ground to cover, Sheriff. Someone on these grounds may have seen or heard something. Get as many deputies as you can, circulating. Talk to your own people for the time being. We can nail the show-people later. Besides, the good Colonel is a trifle too anxious to get rolling and close the case, right or wrong."

"And you, Inspector?"

"I'm going back to the hotel."

The Sheriff's face fell. "You aint quittin' on me, Mr. Bradlen?"

"Mercy, no." Bradlen slipped his pipe back into his jacket pocket. "Thayler has a wife," he said. . . .

Mr. Julius, Buck Lawson and Fred were waiting for Bradlen near the office wagon. With them was Speed Watson, cigarette between tightly compressed lips.

"Well?" said Mr. Julius impatiently.

"A neat job," said Bradlen, eying Speed. "It took nerve and staging."

"Clues?"

"Nothing," Bradlen said.

Speed Watson tossed away his cigarette and reached for another in one fluid motion. "My name's Watson, Inspector. I'm the legal adjuster for the show. We've got to wash this up. I don't think you realize what it means if we get ourselves stymied here."

"I think I do," said Bradlen. "We need coöperation, Speed. Who else besides Buck in this troupe had anything against Thayler?"

"No one that I know of. Damn it, I'm not trying to pin this on you, Buck, but—"

"What did Jill Mason want to see Thayler about tonight?" Bradlen asked.

SPEED and Buck looked at each other. A nerve twitched along the line of Speed's jaw. "Where in hell did you get the idea she did want to see him?"

"She says so. But not why. It might help to know."

"You better ask her," Speed said.

"I will. You see, she was waiting at the foot of the tower stair while Thayler was killed. She says she saw the murderer."

"God almighty!" Buck said.

Speed stood motionless, hands clenched at his sides.

"You wouldn't know something you haven't told us, would you, Watson?" Bradlen asked.

"Who did she see?" Speed said.

"She doesn't know."

"But—"

"She says it wasn't Buck. That's as far as she goes. But if she should happen to remember some detail—something that would point in a definite direction—" Bradlen let it rest there.

"If this gets around," Buck said, "someone might try to keep her quiet."

Bradlen sighed. "I'm glad you get the point, Buck. I'd feel better if you and Fred and Watson were to keep an eye on her."

The wail of the siren at Jill's drome cut through to their consciousness. "Thayler had an accident," Bradlen said softly. "It wouldn't be too hard to arrange another accident in that death-trap of Jill's—a punctured tire—the destruction of her balance for an instant."

"Fred!" Buck was already loping toward the drome. Casey trotted at his heels. But Speed Watson hesitated.

"You've made a mistake, letting Lawson run around loose, Inspector. He's been off his nut about Thayler for years. He's a good-enough guy, but—"

"Jill likes him too much?" Bradlen suggested.

Speed's eyes were green and hard. "I guess I'm an All-American sucker," he said. "I had an idea you were working for the Sheriff. I see that Buck's your baby. Okay, if that's the way it is." He turned and walked quickly toward the drome.

Mr. Julius jabbed at the ground with his umbrella. "What's wrong? Losing your grip? Letting a monkey like that tell you off?"

"Mercy," said Bradlen. "I thought I did quite well. The more people who keep an eye on that young woman, the better chance there is of her living to graceful old age."

"You got any ideas, or are you just fiddling?" demanded Mr. Julius.

MR. JULIUS paused on the landing to catch his breath. He and Bradlen were climbing the carpeted stairway to the third floor of the Equinox House, where the Thayler suite was located.

"Give it up, Bradlen," he said. "Go back to chasing your little white ball over the countryside. Forget it."

"Whoa," said Bradlen. "What's eating you?"

"You've no obligation," said Mr. Julius. "Not a cop up here. Let it drop."

"But you're the one—" Bradlen protested.

"I know. Damn' fool—can't keep my nose out of people's affairs. But let this drop, Bradlen."

"I'm afraid I don't get it," said Bradlen.

The old man's faded eyes avoided Bradlen. "Thayler deserved to die," he said. "Ninety per cent of all the victims in murder cases deserve to die. They've turned the screws on someone beyond endurance. Thayler did that to that boy."

"You think Buck did it?"

Mr. Julius evaded a direct answer. "The boy was right. The law doesn't operate for his kind against Thayler's kind. Never did. He could be a useful citizen. The girl could help him. Great Scott, she's in love with him and won't admit it. Human—real, those two. What about Thayler? A phony—no loss to anyone except maybe his wife."

"I wonder," said Bradlen, glancing up and along the corridor. "I wonder very much about that, Julius."

"Give it up," the old man persisted.

"This is a cockeyed world, Julius. There's only one way to keep a semblance of order in it. Obey the rules. Murder is against the rules."

"If Lawson did it, you'll turn him in?"

"Yes," said Bradlen slowly, "I will. You see, I still believe in the system. I still believe in the rules."

"Whole thing's my fault," the old man said bitterly. "I pushed you into it. But I don't have to help you crucify those young people. Don't like it. Throwing in my hand."

"I'm sorry," Bradlen said. "I'll go it alone, then."

"You will *not!*" said the old man, with a return of his usual crotchety impatience. "I'm not helping, mind you. If I guessed the answer, I'd keep it to myself. But I'm coming along for the ride!" He started to climb again.

As they drew abreast the door of the Thayler suite, Bradlen said: "Haven't you wondered where Mrs. Thayler has been for the last two hours?"

"Forgot about her till you reminded me," said Mr. Julius.

"I'm about to set a trap for the lady, Julius. Don't interfere with the springing of it."

"Am I a fool?" The old man raised his umbrella and knocked on the door.

A man opened the door—a manservant, apparently. His hair was iron-gray, his dark eyes opaque, his face a polite mask.

"We'd like to see Mrs. Thayler," Bradlen said.

"Mrs. Thayler has retired, sir; and Mr. Thayler is not in as yet."

"I know," Bradlen said. "All the same, I'm afraid we'll have to disturb Mrs. Thayler. There's been an accident."

Nothing happened to the servant's face. "If you'll wait," he said. He started to turn away, when a woman's voice came to them, clear and steady: "Ask the gentlemen to come in, Montague."

Ellen Thayler stood in the middle of the sitting-room. She had placed herself behind an Adam chair, her ringless hands pale on the back of it. Scarlet slippers peeped from beneath the full skirt of her white satin housecoat, and a scarlet chiffon handkerchief was tied around her waist. Black hair framed a tanned face that would have been strikingly beautiful but for the frightened look in her eyes.

"You said something about an accident, gentlemen?"

Bradlen introduced himself and Mr. Julius. "There has been a tragedy, Mrs. Thayler."

Ellen Thayler raised a hand to her throat. "Sebastian—"

"Your husband is dead, Mrs. Thayler. I'm sorry to have to tell you that he has been murdered."

The woman swayed on her feet. The raised hand lifted to her mouth as if to stifle a scream.

Bradlen drew a long breath.

"Don't you think you're being a touch hammy, Mrs. Thayler?"

She stared at him.

"You knew this nearly two hours ago," Bradlen said. "You overheard the man who told me about it. You had just come back from the fair-grounds yourself, hadn't you?"

She seemed frozen, unable to speak.

"You didn't want it known you'd been there. You had to wait for someone to bring you the news. You didn't realize I'd seen you in front of the hotel. These must have been a bad two hours for you, Mrs. Thayler."

BRADLEN decided that Ellen Thayler had never talked to anyone about her husband before. It tumbled out with all the violence of flood-waters released by a broken dam. Bradlen let her talk because he wanted to know about Sebastian Thayler.

It was a story of cruelty, of humiliations, of petty sadism. Sebastian Thayler had begun in Hollywood when movies were in their infancy. He had been a writer, an actor, a director, a shoestring producer, growing with the industry until he now was recognized as one of the great directors. That part of him was honest. He had taste, a shrewd business sense. He had earned his way to the top. He had never allowed personal emotions or prejudices to overrule his professional judgment.

But the man's private life was something else again. He had been married twice before. His first wife had died in a mental institution on the coast. His second wife had divorced him after a few months. She had since remarried, raised a family, shaken off the Thayler blight. Ellen had married him eight years ago, just as he was reaching the peak of his fame. She had been much younger, excited by his interest in her, proud of his genius.

Then she found out the truth. He was sensual and possessive, but he lost interest in anything once he owned it. It was true of material things; it was true of women. His one passion lay in conquest. However, it suited him to be married. It was a buffer between him and breach-of-promise suits. He was not even discreet about his affairs. He was unconcerned whether Ellen knew about them or not.

"But you stayed with him," Mr. Julius interrupted.

"I was afraid of him," Ellen said, "and too numb to care any longer."

"May we get down to cases, Mrs. Thayler?" Bradlen said. "How do you happen to be here in Manchester?"

"A holiday," she said. "We had about ten days' leeway before Sebastian could settle the business he came East to do. He had one healthy interest, Mr. Bradlen—golf. He was eager to play the course here. We'd only planned to spend a day or two. Then he said the course was so good he wanted to stay on. But it wasn't that."

Bradlen waited.

ELLEN THAYLER turned away from him. "It wasn't the girl's fault. She was probably dazzled by his position—what he offered her."

"What girl, Mrs. Thayler?"

She looked back at him, her head held high. "Some sort of acrobat at this country fair. That's the kind of thing I had to deal with, Mr. Bradlen."

"The girl at the motordrome?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't make sense," Mr. Julius said. "We talked to that girl tonight. She—"

"Please," said Bradlen. "This is my party, Julius."

Ellen Thayler went on: "She called him on the phone tonight and made an appointment with him at the fair-grounds. Sebastian tried to camouflage his conversation with her, but I always knew when he was talking to a woman. It was his tone of voice."

"Go on, Mrs. Thayler."

"I haven't much courage, Inspector. If I had, I wouldn't have stuck with Sebastian all these years. But suddenly I was fed up. I didn't want that girl to join the long list who have fallen for his promises of screen tests and jobs in pictures. So I decided to follow Sebastian to the fair-grounds; to point out to this girl exactly what she stood to gain—which was nothing!"

"You were beginning to make sense," Mr. Julius said.

"I got there too late," said Ellen Thayler in a flat voice. "They were carrying his body down from the tower."

"And you ran away?"

She kept her eyes fixed on the tips of her scarlet slippers. "Of all the people in the world who wished Sebastian Thayler dead, I suppose I wished it most," she said.

Bradlen was silent for a moment. It seemed a straightforward story. Yet its very frankness made Bradlen wary, having trapped her in a deception at the beginning. He had long before this had all the techniques of self-defense tried on him. One of the most effective was to admit to motive and opportunity and then throw yourself on the mercy of the investigator.

"Mrs. Thayler, when Jill Mason made a date with your husband tonight, was any specific place mentioned?"

She seemed reluctant. "It's not really evidence against her, Mr. Bradlen. But Sebastian did say—'on the water-tower—as soon after nine as you can make it.' Someone else *could* have got there before she did."

"And did," said Mr. Julius. "Can you picture a woman punching Thayler in the jaw and lifting him up over that rail?"

"Jill Mason is an athlete," Bradlen said.

"But still a woman—and damn' feminine at that!"

Bradlen let it go. "Mrs. Thayler, do you know a young man named Lawson—Buck Lawson?"

"I know about him. I know that Sebastian saw him at the fair-grounds yesterday."

"Why did your husband have it in for Lawson?"

"Mr. Bradlen, Sebastian had only one great concern in his life—himself! That boy once endangered Sebastian's life. Sebastian claimed it was the result of carelessness. He never forgot or forgave Lawson. He never would have."

"Exactly what happened between them?"

"My husband had his own plane in Hollywood, which he flies himself. You may think that's out of character

but he felt it helped make him a dashing figure. It was four years ago. He had flown to Reno to talk business with an actress who was there. The *business,"* and she underlined the word with irony, "took longer than he expected. Also, he ran into friends—a man and wife—and offered to fly them back to Hollywood with him.

"Sebastian didn't fly at night. He had to get back, so he sent to an airport near by and got a commercial pilot who was there to fly the ship back to Hollywood. Lawson was that pilot. On the way home, the plane crashed into a mountainside. Sebastian and Lawson got out of it alive somehow. The man and his wife were killed.

"There was an investigation. Lawson claimed the altimeter on the plane must have been defective. He was an experienced pilot, with hundreds of hours of night-flying behind him. That made no difference to Sebastian. His precious life had almost been snuffed out. Lawson was to blame. Sebastian used his influence, and that was the end of Lawson's career."

"So vindictiveness was one of your husband's qualities?" Bradlen said.

"He never forgave anyone anything, Mr. Bradlen. He would hound and hound some poor devil of a technician who made a mistake on the lot until every door in the picture business was closed to him. He once put a tailor out of business, because he accidentally burned a hole in a new sports-coat Sebastian had sent to be pressed."

"Plain, unadulterated species of louse!" said Mr. Julius.

"Did you ever hear of Colonel Thorne, who is the owner of the carnival here, Mrs. Thayler?"

"I never heard of him. Sebastian never mentioned him."

"Is there anyone else here in Chanford who had it in for your husband?"

"We didn't know anyone here, Inspector. Sebastian said he had seen Lawson. He was the only one."

Bradlen sighed. "I'm sorry to have had to put you through this tonight, Mrs. Thayler, but we needed information. Of course you won't leave Chanford until the Sheriff gives you the word."

"I understand." Then Ellen Thayler reached out and closed her cold fingers over Bradlen's wrist. "It could have been an accident, Inspector. It *could* have been."

Bradlen shook his head. "I'm afraid not. The case has taken no shape yet, but we know it was murder. I advise you to get as much rest as you can tonight. Tomorrow there'll be more prying."

MONTAGUE, the model servant, led them to the door. About to step out into the hall, Bradlen halted.

"You've been with Mr. Thayler a long time, Montague?"

"Since before his marriage to the present Mrs. Thayler," the man replied.

Bradlen said: "I'm curious. You haven't always been a servant."

"No sir." Not the slightest change of expression.

"Did you work under Thayler as an actor before you took this position?"

"Yes."

"Then this set-up can't have been altogether pleasant for you."

"A job is a job these days," Montague said.

"You were Thayler's personal servant? His valet?"

"Yes."

"Montague, what did Thayler have against you?"

"Nothing, sir. I always gave him satisfaction."

"From what I've heard about Thayler, he would have taken pleasure in putting you in this kind of spot, if he had a reason."

"There was nothing of that sort," said Montague stolidly.

Bradlen shrugged. "A man can't have very much pride, to become the bodyservant of another man with whom he's worked on an equal footing in the past."

That did it. A hard glitter came into Montague's eyes, and the muscles along his jaw knotted. "I have as much pride as the next man, Mr. Bradlen," he said. "Good night." He closed the door in Bradlen's face.

"You've been asking for this, Speed!" Buck made a dive for the fixer.

"A fine how-do-you-do!" said Mr. Julius. "This doesn't seem to be your kind of case, Bradlen. No authority. No clues. No blunt instrument, or fingerprints, or ballistics reports. No organization behind you. Better give it up. Shame to meet your Waterloo in a hick village."

"I think I'll carry on a bit longer," Bradlen said. "The night's young. You know, Julius, nobody can convince me that Jill Mason would fall for Thayler's phony line. Why did she make a date with him?"

"To tell him where to get off."

"Perhaps. Yet she arranged it at a time when she should have been working. She could have seen him later tonight, or tomorrow morning. Why that special time? It's not like show-people to walk out on a performance."

"What's the good in speculation?" Julius was impatient.

Bradlen seemed not to hear him. "If she and the murderer were working together, Julius, she would have made excellent bait for a trap."

"Phooey," said Mr. Julius. But he sounded unhappy.

Bradlen drove them back to the fair-grounds in his own car. He drove fast. Mr. Julius, glancing at his face, illuminated by the glow from the dash, saw an expression that was familiar. Mr. Julius knew that he was worried.

The entrance gate to the fair-grounds was closed, but they were admitted by one of Sheriff Burns' men. The customers were gone. A complete change come over the grounds, like the change on the face of a hostess who has been full of laughter and gayety and then finally closes the door behind her last guest. The bright lights were gone, the raucous voices stilled; wheels had stopped turning. Along the midway only a few unshaded electric bulbs burned. Behind wagons campfires flickered. The parking-lot, which had accommodated a thousand cars during the day and night, was deserted except for the machines belonging to Sheriff Burns and his deputies. The silence, after twelve hours of continuous noise and bustle, was almost oppressive. Men slept in blanket-rolls under wagons, or on piles of canvas behind the tents and concessions. A few of the hands were gathered around the cook-wagon taking on coffee with beans, or hamburgers, or something which was laughingly referred to as stew.

There were still lights in the windows of the office-wagon. Bradlen and Mr. Julius found the Sheriff in a huddle with Colonel Thorne.

"You git anythin' to help us, Mr. Bradlen?" Burns asked.

Bradlen shook his head.

Across the room, a blank stare fixed on the dead man, stood Ellen Thayler.

"It seems like I drawed a blank too," the Sheriff said. "There jest wasn't no one payin' any attention to that consarned water-tower. Nobody heard or seen nothin'!"

Bradlen pointed the stem of his pipe at Colonel Thorne. "How many people in this outfit were with you when you worked for Thayler on the coast?"

"Why, there are none," said Thorne. "That was a vaudeville troupe. We did a scene from the 'Lady of the Camellias,' and it was not bad, sir. Not bad at all. I played the father of *Armand*, the hero. I—"

"And there are none of them in this present outfit?"

"There are not, sir."

Bradlen turned to the Sheriff. "You're going to have to check these show-people. Get a list from the Colonel of everyone connected with him. Make sure they're all where they should be, and that none of them leave. Find out if any of them knew Thayler or ever worked for him. It's a long tough job, and it probably won't bring results, but we've got to get it done."

The Sheriff nodded. "I'll do the best I can, Mr. Bradlen."

"You don't expect the murderer to talk, do you?" Mr. Julius asked, as they left the wagon and headed for Jill's motordrome.

"I don't," said Bradlen. "But I'd like to keep him occupied and under observation."

Fred Casey was squatting on his haunches at the back of the motordrome, alongside a barred cage in which Jill's lion slept. This "man-eating king of the jungle" was known on the lot as the Thin Man, and he'd come by his name naturally. His ribs were pronounced. He existed on mush, ground meat and liver, because he no longer had teeth enough to operate on a bone.

Fred stood up, tossing his cigarette away into the darkness. "Any luck, Mr. Bradlen?"

"Not any," said Bradlen. "Where are Buck and Speed?"

Fred jerked a thumb toward the door of the drome. "Inside, watchin' her and each other," he said dryly.

"Take us in, Fred."

CASEY knocked, then pushed open a door which fitted flush into the side wall of the drome. Inside, a single light with a piece of newspaper pinned around it for a shade hung against the wall. Under this light sat Speed Watson, playing a game of solitaire on an upturned case. His green eyes shot in Bradlen's direction and then returned to his cards. Buck was pacing up and down the padded floor. Jill sat on a pile of blankets, back against the wall, smoking a cigarette. The place smelled of monoxide fumes. Jill's motorcycles, and a little car the size of an Austin in which the Thin Man took his rides, rested in the center of the floor. Glancing up along the circular forty-foot walls, Bradlen could see a patch of starlit sky.

"I'm glad you're all here," he said, and his voice reverberated as if it were coming from the bottom of a well.

Jill got up from her blanket roll. "Me, I've got a bone to pick with you, Inspector. How am I expected to get any rest with these two ghosts haunting me?"

"You've got quite a set-up here," Bradlen said.

"You can buy it cheap," said Jill.

"How did you happen to get in this racket?"

"Stranded chorus-girl," Jill said. "Got a job stooging for the Great Moroni; best drome-rider that ever lived. I used to ride on his handlebars. He broke his neck one afternoon. I took over his equipment." She dropped her cigarette and crushed it out under her heel. "I suppose you've come to ask me about the phone-call," she said with a sigh.

"What phone-call?" Buck demanded.

Speed's fingers stopped moving. He held a card suspended over the board, his eyes on Jill.

Jill kept looking at Bradlen. "Is that it?"

"That's it."

"I called Thayler about a quarter past eight," Jill said. "I asked him to meet me out here—at the tower—" Her voice faltered.

"And that you'd be there as soon after nine as you could make it?"

"That's right."

Buck said: "This is crazy. You know damn' well you never made a date with that heel. After the other night—" He checked himself.

"What happened the other night?" Bradlen's voice was deceptively gentle.

"Thayler had wandering hands," Jill said. "We run into plenty of 'em in this business. He tried to date me up the first night we were here. Pulled the old malarky about a screen test, and what his influence would mean if I'd just be nice. I wasn't having any. I told him to go peddle his papers. That night, after we'd shut down, he turned up here. I practically had to throw a motorcycle at him to keep from being manhandled."

Bradlen waited. Nobody made any comment. "So in the face of that, you made another date with him tonight?"

Jill's lips tightened. "That's the story."

"Jill!" Buck's face had gone white. "You don't mean—"

"Maybe I changed my mind about a screen career."

There was a sharp click as Speed slapped a card down on the board and continued with his game.

"You don't mind," Bradlen drawled, "if I say I don't think there's a word of truth in your explanation. Couldn't we begin again? Why did you phone Thayler?"

"Look," Jill said angrily, "it's my business if I'm sick of this damn' ride to nowhere." She gestured at the circular walls. "Maybe I wanted to get out of it so bad, the price wasn't too high."

"Maybe," said Bradlen. "And maybe it was something else. You made a date with Thayler for nine o'clock at the water-tower. He arrived. By some strange coincidence the murderer was waiting for him. That was a very lucky break for the murderer. Everything working like clockwork. Maybe you helped arrange that lucky chance."

Speed Watson jumped to his feet, knocking over the box on which his cards were spread. "How do you like your boy friend's flatfoot now, Jill?" he demanded. "Anything to clear Buck. Anything, even if it means pinning it on you."

"You've been asking for this, Speed!" And Buck made a dive at the fixer.

Somehow Bradlen was between them. He caught Speed by his coat lapels and sent him spinning back against the wall. His left hand closed like a vise over Buck's wrist.

"If there's any slapping-down to be done, I'll do it!" he said. "Well, Jill? I say you helped arrange Thayler's death. What's your answer to that?"

"I say you're wacky, my fine-feathered friend," said Jill.

Speed came slowly back to where they stood, his green eyes smoldering with anger. "What the hell, Jill!" he said. "The copper will dig it out of some of the boys." He faced Bradlen. "I was fixing to teach Thayler a lesson he'd never forget. Nobody can treat Jill the way he did, I don't care how big a shot he is."

"So?"

"So we were going to take him for a little ride after the show tonight. I figured a coating of tar and feathers would be right handsome on Sebastian Thayler. Jill didn't want me to do it. She argued with me, but I made up my mind and had a couple of the boys ready to help me."

"So?"

"So Jill must have phoned him to warn him."

"Is that the way it was, Jill?"

"That's the way it was," she said. "We've got enough trouble without having an amateur Ku Klux Klan around."

"Why didn't you warn him over the phone?"

"Because he would have turned up here with a bunch of cops and had Speed pinched. I wanted to talk to him, straight to his ugly mug, so he'd know exactly where he got off."

"You can't make murder out of *that!*" Speed said.

"Somebody did," said Bradlen. "When you've been in this business as long as I have, you'll get so you don't believe in coincidence. Not the kind that sets the stage for a killing so perfectly. Who knew about this phone-call, Jill?"

"Nobody."

"Not Buck—or Fred?"

"Not anyone."

BRADLEN took his pipe from his pocket and began slowly to fill it with tobacco. "There was one person, Jill: Mrs. Thayler. She overheard the conversation."

Jill said nothing.

"Jill, could it have been a woman you saw waiting on the tower for Thayler? There was time, after your call, for her to get there. She admits coming, but says it was *after* Thayler was found. But she was planning to tell him off. Could it have been a woman?"

Jill's hands were clenched tightly at her sides. She didn't answer. Bradlen went on:

"I know what's going through your mind. Thayler was a rat. Mrs. Thayler suffered badly at his hands. You've got nice instincts, Jill. You don't want to pin this on her."

Jill looked straight at him. "That's the way I feel. But I'm going to tell you the truth. The figure I saw was no more than a shadow. It *could* have been a woman, but I didn't think so at the time."

"Any special reason?"

"I heard Thayler speak. He said, very offhandedly: 'Oh, it's you!' He was just at the top. He didn't sound as though he was talking to a woman. But if it was a woman he didn't care about—I can't be more definite."

Bradlen sighed. "You see how it is. If she was the only person who knew about the call, then she is the only person who could have planned to be on hand. Still—" He didn't seem satisfied.

SUDDENLY Jill grabbed his arm. "But there *was* someone else!" she cried. "I must have been nuts not to remember! Thayler's man Friday—the butler, or valet, or whatever he is. He answered the phone. Took my name. He could very well have heard the same thing Mrs. Thayler heard."

"And that makes two," said Bradlen. "Who else, Jill? Keep thinking."

"That's all," Jill said.

"Where did you make the call from?"

"There's a phone connection set up in the ticket-wagon at the entrance to the grounds. They have it so the food concessions or anyone else who needs something in a hurry can order it without going right into town. Bob Yerkes, our ticket-man, let me use it."

"Then *he* heard your conversation?"

"He was working at the window. The evening crowd was coming in fast."

"Bob would pass on anything he heard," Buck said. "He's an old woman for gossip."

Bradlen's eyes were bleak. "Then anyone on the grounds may have got wind of it."

"Nice case," said Mr. Julius with satisfaction. "Opens up like a flower in spring. Looks like our murderer might get away with it after all. Suits me."

"It doesn't suit me," said Speed. "I'll tell you this, Bradlen: You'll have to call out the militia to hold this show here after tomorrow night. We're not staying here to starve to death while we wait for you to figure out some other answer besides the one that's staring you in the face."

Fred Casey sidled forward. "Just remember one thing, Speed: Bradlen won't be around here to save your hide forever. Buck and I aint forgetting."

"You and elephants!" Speed snapped. "Buck's been waiting four years for a crack at Thayler, and he didn't forget to take it when the time came."

"Stop it!" Bradlen said, sharply. He walked to the door and then turned back to them, hand on the latch. "There's not one of you in the clear. You're all trying to push facts around to suit yourselves. Well, if that's the way you want to play, it's all right with me. But don't forget there's a killer loose here somewhere—maybe one of *you*. And killing gets easy after you've done it once. If that matters to you, then keep your eyes open."

Bradlen walked rapidly along the deserted midway, Mr. Julius at his heels, raincoat flapping. Just outside the darkened girl-show tent, Sheriff Burns was talking to a swarthy, muscular man clad only in pants and undershirt. Bradlen pulled up. The undershirted gentleman gave him a sullen look.

"We gotta sleep, you know. We've been on the go fifteen hours," he complained. "I keep tellin' this rube I don't know nothin'. Nobody knows anythin', or we'd've heard it. Stuff gets around an outfit like this."

The Sheriff tugged at his coat lapel. "I don't seem to be gettin' nowhere, Inspector. These people are like a bed of clams."

Bradlen turned to Mr. Julius. "Are you still putting on your own private imitation of justice, or are you willing to help?"

"It depends," said the old man sourly.

"If anyone can get these people to talk, you can. Join forces with the Sheriff, and see what you can find out."

"I'll go it alone. Use my own system," said Mr. Julius. "Won't guarantee to tell you what I find out. Not if it doesn't suit me."

"All right," said Bradlen, wearily. "Handle it any way you like. Somebody ought to fall for your charm!"

"Humph!"

"Where will I find Yerkes, the ticket-man?" Bradlen asked the undershirted gentleman.

"He beds down in the trailer by the entrance gate. He won't like it if you wake him up."

"That's too bad," said Bradlen. He turned to go.

"Hold on," said Mr. Julius. "You're not still playing with the ridiculous idea it may have been a woman? Waste of time to fiddle with that theory."

"Perhaps," said Bradlen, "when you were a child—if you ever were—you studied the theory of the lever and the fulcrum. It wouldn't have taken *strength* to grab Thayler by the heels and topple him into the tank. A child could have done it." With that, he left.

FIVE minutes later a tousled and decidedly annoyed Yerkes stuck his head out the trailer door on which Bradlen had been hammering.

"Listen, guy," he said ominously, "I don't know who the hell you are, but so help me, if you don't get out—"

"My name is Bradlen, if that means anything to you. I have some questions to ask, and you're going to answer."

"Am I?"

"You are, my friend. You have a telephone connection in the ticket-wagon. Jill Mason used it tonight about a quarter past eight."

"You seem to be telling me," said Yerkes.

"Quite so. She called Sebastian Thayler and made a date with him at the water-tower for approximately nine o'clock. To whom did you pass the word about it?"

"You're talking Greek, brother. I was on the window. No time for eavesdropping on anyone's phone-calls. If Jill made a date with Thayler, I didn't know about it."

"This is just a tip," said Bradlen. His voice had a rasping edge to it. "If you *did* pass that information on to anyone, it will be a break for Jill. It will mean that someone else knew Thayler was coming, and waited for him. If you didn't pass it on, then Jill is in a spot."

Yerkes thought that over, and Bradlen had his answer in part. Evidently Yerkes *had* spilled.

Bradlen turned away. "I can't make you talk," he said. "Not yet."

"Wait a minute, brother," Yerkes said. "No kidding, I'd cut off my arm to keep Jill out of a jam. She's one of the few decent troupers on the lot. Maybe I did say something about her phone-call."

"To whom?"

Yerkes shook his head. "This is off the top of the deck, pal. I don't remember. Some of the boys were hangin' around the wagon. There was a lull in customers, and I remember saying something like that Jill wouldn't be with us long. That she'd made a date with the big movie mogul, and the bright lights of Hollywood would get her. Just a kind of wisecrack. Everybody around here would like to see Jill get a break. It was good news." Yerkes shrugged. "The guys I said that to could have passed it on, and probably did."

Bradlen drove back to the hotel. The lobby was deserted except for the night clerk. Bradlen said he wanted to put through a long-distance call to Hollywood.

"I want to speak personally with Chief Inspector Galowan of the Hollywood police force."

Ten minutes later he had Galowan on the phone.

"Red Bradlen speaking, you horsethief!"

"*Heil,* heel!" said Galowan cheerfully. "What's on your mind?"

"One of your brightest citizens has just got knocked off in a small Vermont town. Sebastian Thayler. It's murder, Spike."

Galowan whistled. "How long ago? We haven't had a flash on it."

"The only newspaper man in this town was sound asleep at half-past eight," Bradlen said, "fortunately. We'll be swarming with 'em tomorrow. I'm helping out the local Sheriff. What about Thayler, Spike?"

"Right out from under the lining of the bottom drawer," Galowan said.

"Who was gunning for him, Spike?"

"The entire male sex and about three-quarters of the females," said Galowan dryly. "They'll declare a holiday out here when the news breaks."

"It's costing dough to listen to your wisecracks."

"I rang for the files the minute you mentioned his name," Galowan said. "No kidding, Red, there wasn't a soul didn't hate his guts. Hold on. Here's our only official record on Thayler. He asked for police protection about twelve years ago, and we gave it to him. A fellow named Tex Larimee was after him. This Larimee was an old cowboy star of the silent era. Thayler gave him the gate—probably with a trimming of low blows. Larimee blew his top, threatened to get Thayler, who hollered for help."

"What then?"

"We never caught up with Larimee, but apparently he cooled off. Nothing ever happened to Thayler."

"Not till tonight," Bradley said. "What did Larimee look like?"

"Hell, Red, I never laid eyes on him. I could get you some stills from the studios, most likely."

"Do that, Spike, and ship 'em on. This thing happened on a carnival lot. Couple of hundred show-people involved. It's a long shot, but for all I know, this bird Larimee might be one of them. Nothing else on Thayler?"

"Of course we've all heard rumors of guys who were going to pin his ears back," Galowan said. "But Larimee is all that's official."

"Did you ever hear of a fellow named Montague, Thayler's valet?"

"That's one of Hollywood's classic stories," Galowan said. "Montague was a romantic lead in the old days. They say he took some dame away from Thayler. Thayler has been paying him off ever since."

"Montague isn't Tex Larimee, by any chance?"

"Lord, no. Thayler wouldn't have let Larimee within miles of him."

"I guess that's that," Bradlen said. "Send along the pictures of Larimee, just in case."

"Air mail, as quick as I can make it," Galowan said. "And Red, if you catch up with the killer, you might look the other way, just as a favor to the movie industry."

"There seems," said Bradlen, "to be a conspiracy in that direction."

He eased himself out of the phone-booth and went back to the desk.

"Where will I find a fellow named Montague who was Thayler's valet?" he asked.

"He's got a room on the third floor right next to the Thayler suite," the clerk said. "The chauffeurs and servants are usually put up in the annex, but Mr. Thayler wanted his man available at all times, so he took a room for him here." He checked his lists. "It's Number 307."

Bradlen climbed to the third floor. There was a slit of light showing under the door of 307. He knocked. There was no answer, and he tried the door. He opened it.

"Montague?"

He stepped across the threshold—and stopped abruptly.

MONTAGUE, the perfect servant, sat in an armchair facing the door. His arms hung down to the floor on each side of the chair, his head tilted over onto his right shoulder at a grotesque and impossible angle. The reason for this was that his throat had been cut from ear to ear. The place looked like an abattoir.

That was not all.

Across the room, back to the wall, a blank, twisted stare fixed on the dead man, stood Ellen Thayler. Slowly she turned her head to look at Bradlen. There was no recognition in her clouded dark eyes.

Then Ellen Thayler opened her mouth and screamed—screamed again. The sound stabbed the quiet Vermont night with horror. Bradlen stepped toward her quickly.

"Stop it!" he said. *"Stop it!"*

She screamed again, but it was cut short as Bradlen struck her a flat-handed blow across the cheek.

Her mouth quivered. She began to shake convulsively. Then she was clinging to Bradlen, torn by sobs.

THE doctor joined Bradlen in the living-room of the Thayler suite. His name was Kellog, and he was a guest in the hotel. He was a badly shaken man. He kept rumpling his gray hair, drawing the silk dressing-gown he wore tighter around his lean body.

"God, this sort of thing is old stuff to you, Inspector. But I need a drink!" He poured himself a heavy slug of brandy from a bottle on a side table. "Never saw anything quite like it in my life." He tossed off the drink. "The brutal ferocity of it!"

"Did Mrs. Thayler talk?" Bradlen's eyes were cold.

"Disjointedly," Kellog said. "She's completely off base, Inspector. Walking in on that bloody mess would be enough to throw anyone."

"What did she say?"

"She kept repeating something about 'he'd only just got a chance to live.' I gathered she was referring to the dead man. Does that make any sense to you?"

"It does."

"She evidently wanted him for something; and when he didn't answer the call on his phone, she went to his room."

"When will she be able to talk to me?"

"Heaven knows, Inspector. I've given her a heavy sedative. She may be all right when she comes out of it. She may not. We can't anticipate the duration of shock."

"Get in touch with me the instant you feel she can give us any information."

"I will, Inspector. You're off?"

"That man," said Bradlen, nodding in the direction of Montague's room, "could probably have given me more dope than anyone about Thayler's death. If I'd pressed him for facts when I first saw him, he might be alive now. I was so concerned about another person I thought was in danger, I overlooked this possibility entirely. I'm responsible for this; but by God, I'm going to square the account! Good night, Doctor."

The Sheriff, badly rattled, was in the lobby. Bradlen had sent one of the bellboys to the fair-grounds for him. He had been making inquiries about how the murderer could have got to Montague's room. No one had passed through the lobby after Bradlen had left the first time. Guests had retired, and the night man swore he had never left his post behind the desk. But the fact emerged that there was a back stairway leading up from the basement; that doors were never locked in this peaceful town; that anyone who chose could have used the back way to come and go, and no one the wiser.

"I want Mrs. Thayler watched," Bradlen told Burns. "No one's to go near her except the doctor and the nurse, when she gets here. And you can swear me in as a deputy now, Sheriff. I want authority to act when I get my hooks into this baby."

A grim and determined Bradlen drove back to the fair-grounds alone. A heavy mist, made silvery by the moon, hung over the valley. Most of the campfires on the grounds had died away, but here and there embers glowed red. The stillness of the night was intense.

Bradlen parked his car and walked along the deserted midway to the motordrome. Fred Casey, his head sunk forward on his chest, sat on a crate, back against the building, the short end of a cigarette in his fingers. He looked

"Jill, if you're not just being kind—"

up as he heard Bradlen's approach. The expression on the detective's face brought him to his feet.

"Gosh, what's wrong, Mr. Bradlen?"

"The other three inside?"

"Yes. Hell, they won't either one of them guys let the other one out of his sight."

"It will be a good thing for them if that's true," Bradlen said. "Fred, when I first went back to the hotel, I left you three men to watch Jill. What happened? Did you, or Buck, or Speed leave here for any length of time?"

"No sir. Buck and Watson went inside with Jill. I figured it would be a good idea if someone stayed outside—just in case our murderer tried a sneak-up on Jill. They never left, and I've been parked here for so long I'm liable to start sprouting roots."

"You're positive?"

"Of course I'm positive. There's no way to get out of that drome except right through this-here door. I haven't been three feet away from it since we first come here."

"Fred, did you ever hear of a Tex Larimee?"

Casey's face screwed up in a puzzled frown. "The name sounds familiar, Mr. Bradlen, but I don't seem to tie it up with anyone. Was he a driver?"

"He was a cowboy star in the silent movie days. Know him?"

Light broke. "Sure, I remember him. But I don't *know* him."

"Do you remember what he looked like?"

"Kind of dark and lanky, with a big toothpaste smile," Casey said.

"Would you know him if you saw him?"

"I guess I would," Casey said. "It's been years since I saw him in pictures, but I guess I'd remember him if I saw him."

"Have you ever seen him on the lot? Among the workmen or performers in the Thorne Show?"

"Why, no! You figure he has something to do with this?"

"I don't know, Fred. He had it in for Thayler. The Hollywood police gave Thayler protection against him, but he disappeared. He might be the man we're looking for, and I can't overlook it as a bet. Two murders are enough for one night."

"Two?"

"Thayler's valet has been killed, Fred. Throat cut while we were messing around with this case."

"Good God!"

"When a man starts running amok this way, there's no telling where he'll stop. We've got to find him and hamstring him!"

"What can I do, Mr. Bradlen?"

Illustrated by
L. R. Gustavson

"I don't want to hurt you, Jill. Don't make me hurt you!"

"Have you seen Julius? He's around somewhere, talking to the show-people."

"I saw him maybe an hour ago," Casey said.

"Find him, and ask him to join me at the office-wagon. He's got to know about this. It may change his attitude toward the case a trifle."

"I'll get him," Casey said, "if it's all right for me to leave here."

"You can tell Speed and Buck and Jill what's happened. I don't want to stop to talk to them now. Tell them to be doubly watchful."

Casey nodded. "If it was that Larimee, Inspector—if he was doggin' Thayler around the country—he might be fifty miles away from here by now."

"He might," said Bradley. "And on the other hand, he might not. Find Julius."

COLONEL THORNE was dozing on a cot which had been set up at one end of the office-wagon. He was still fully clothed. He sat up, blinking, as Bradlen came in. His white hair was messed, and instinctively he patted it into place with his hands.

"Well, sir, you have news?" He swung his feet over the edge of the cot.

"I have news," said Bradlen. "Thayler's valet, one Montague, has had his throat cut."

"Great heavens, not here on the grounds?"

"Not here on the grounds." Bradlen seemed to be shaken by a kind of savage impatience. "But that doesn't mean you or your people aren't involved, Thorne."

"Poor Montague! Poor devil!" said the Colonel. "Oh, I knew him. Not well, you understand. But all Hollywood knew his story. Crossed Thayler in a love affair. Thayler found a way to tie him up—to pay him off. A very sad case, Inspector. Montague had real talent in the old days. To tell you the truth, I had half suspected that *he* might be your man. Each of us has his breaking-point."

"Montague was butchered without a chance to defend himself. By someone he knew, Thorne, or he wouldn't have sat casually in a chair while the murderer drew a knife on him."

"An unpleasant picture, Inspector. A dreadful picture."

"How old are you, Colonel?"

"Why—uh—I am sixty-one years of age, sir, though why—"

"When you were an actor, Thorne, did you use your own name?"

"Why, sir, as a matter of fact, during my career as a Thespian I used several stage names."

"Was one of them 'Tex Larimee'?"

Thorne blinked, and then stood up, stretching to his full height. "I remember Larimee, sir. A low-grade performer of horse operas. I resent—"

"If you are not Larimee, where is he?"

"I haven't the remotest notion. Are you quite certain you feel in good health, Inspector? Your line of questioning—"

"What about your staff? Your canvasmen, truck-drivers, barkers, advance men? Is any one of them Tex Larimee?"

"My dear sir—"

"Colonel, I'm riding a hunch. I think that somewhere, hidden in this troupe of yours, is a man who has been waiting for a long time to settle a score with Sebastian Thayler. I think that man was once known as Tex Larimee. Montague was killed, if I'm right, because he would have recognized Larimee when we gathered all our suspects together for questioning. You, Colonel, if you could recognize Larimee, are in danger. I'm not running any more risks. I want every single performer, stagehand, mechanic, canvas-man—the works—assembled now, at once. You and I are going to check through them, Colonel. You are going to look at every face, with Tex Larimee in mind. If the man is here, we'll find him."

"I think you're wasting time, Inspector. There are no newcomers in my organization. Surely I would know—"

"You might not. It's twelve years since the man was in the public eye. God knows to what extent he may have changed. But if you have Larimee in mind, you may be able to see through those changes. I want you to move at once. Have them all assemble at the track. I want *everyone* there. I want to check with your salary-lists, so that I'm positive no one is missing. How long will it take?"

"Perhaps a half an hour."

"Get started," said Bradlen. He walked out of the wagon and came face to face with Fred Casey.

"I can't seem to locate Mr. Julius, Inspector. He talked to some of the boys a little while back, but nobody's seen him for the last hour. Maybe he hoofed it back to the hotel."

Bradlen lifted a hand to tired eyes. It was not a steady hand. "He didn't go back to the hotel, Fred," he said harshly. "The blasted fool! He's stumbled on the murderer and tried to play God! We've got to find him, if we have to tear down every tent and concession in the place."

Seven minutes later the door in the side of the motordrome opened, and Fred Casey ducked through to the interior. Speed still sat behind his upturned box, his fingers dealing the cards in an endless solitaire. He turned his head, his hands still for an instant.

Buck went quickly toward the mechanic. Jill, propped against the wall, pushed herself up to her feet.

"What's happening, Fred?" Buck asked.

"All hell's popping! The old boy has taken a powder—disappeared, vamoosed."

"Julius?"

"Uh-huh. And Bradlen's acting like a crazy man. He's routing out the whole damn outfit. He thinks Julius got wise to the murderer, and the murderer's given him the business. I guess we don't get out of here tomorrow, or ever!"

"I guess you've got another guess coming," said Speed.

"How could anything happen to him here on the grounds?" Jill asked.

"Something happened to Thayler," said Buck. "There are a hundred places on these grounds where a body could be hidden."

"I guess we're goin' to look into all of 'em before we do any more sleepin'," Fred said.

"What do you mean '*more* sleepin'?" Jill asked. She reached for her polo-coat, which lay beside the blanket-roll. "Bradlen and Mr. Julius came out here to help us. We've got to do what we can to help them now."

"It's not our job," said Speed. "Our job is to keep our mouths shut and let Bradlen do his own figuring. Unless he's got evidence against his killer, we're moving tomorrow. I know the law, and I know he can't hold us. So I'm not helping to dig up evidence."

Casey rubbed the black stubble on his chin. "Ever hear of a guy named Tex Larimee—old-time movie star? Bradlen's got a notion he's hangin' around the lot and is the one who done the two killings and took care of the old boy."

"I never even heard of him," Jill said.

"I remember the name," said Buck.

"He's not in our crew," said Speed. "If he's hanging around somewhere, we can't be blamed for it."

Jill started for the door. "We're not getting anywhere, talking. Bradlen needs us."

"Just a minute." Speed stood in her way. His green eyes looked past Jill at Buck and Fred. "You're not going out there, Jill. With everyone milling around, you may be put on the spot, the way Bradlen said."

"I can take care of myself," Jill said.

"You're staying here," Speed said, "and you're staying here alone. I'm not leaving you with these two monkeys. I'm not clear in my mind that between 'em they couldn't have managed this whole show. We're going out of here, Lawson, you and Casey and I, and we're leaving Jill here, and we're locking the door."

"I guess this won't wait any longer," Buck said, very quietly. He started toward Speed.

"Wait, Buck!" Jill didn't even turn to look at him. Her blue eyes were leveled at Speed. "We might as well get this straight, Speed, once and for all. I didn't want to tell you this way. But here it is: If Buck will have me, I'm stringing along with him from here on."

"Jill!" Buck said, hoarsely.

Instinctively Jill reached back with one hand and felt Buck's fingers close over it. Speed stood balanced on the balls of his feet, his green eyes inscrutable.

"I didn't know it was happening until today, Speed," Jill went on. "Then there was the crash at the track, and all this trouble. I knew then. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

Speed drew a deep breath. "I suppose you expect him to marry you!"

"You don't have to be married to be decent or—or in love," Jill said.

There was a long silence, and then Fred Casey dropped a heavy hand on Speed's shoulder. "I reckon you and I better take the air, Speed," he said.

Speed shook himself free, hesitated a moment, then turned and walked quickly out of the drome. Casey followed him.

JILL faced Buck, a crooked little smile on her lips. "It was pretty fresh of me to say it that way, Buck. But you don't *have* to make an honest woman of me."

"Darling—"

"It's just that Speed had to know, without any doubts, how I felt."

"Jill! Jill, my sweet!" His arms were around her. "It's been four years since I had any hope, since I felt anything inside. If you're not just being kind—"

"Can't you feel that I'm not? Buck, Mr. Julius was right. You've got places to go. Thayler can't hurt you any more, and unless—unless you—"

"I didn't kill him, Jill. Before God, I didn't."

Her cool cheek rested against his for a moment. Then she said: "We must help, Buck. Until this mess is settled, we can't think of ourselves."

Fred Casey was waiting for them outside the door of the drome. The whole fair-grounds had started to stir with activity. Fred held out his hand to Buck, but his smile was directed at Jill.

"It kind of looks as if we're getting the breaks at last!"

INSIDE the race-track Bradlen had climbed up onto the platform opposite the grandstand where vaudeville was performed between races. A string of Japanese lanterns decorating its front and sides had been lit. Down below him, the members of Colonel Thorne's Mammoth Show were gathering in a silent, sullen group. Most of them were only partially dressed, sleepy-eyed, muttering to each other.

Colonel Thorne came puffing up the stairway to take his place beside Bradlen on the platform.

"I believe we are all here, Inspector," he said.

Bradlen looked out into the semi-darkness at the upturned faces. These people were not anxious to help.

"I want you all to get one thing clear at the outset," he said, in a clear, hard voice. "This show is not moving; not tomorrow, not ever, until the man who has tonight committed two murders, and possibly a third one, is found. There are no legal technicalities that will get you moving, despite what you may have been told. I'll keep you here till you starve, till your rides rust, till your equipment rots. I'll keep you here if I have to call out the militia to do it, as someone suggested.

"All of you know what happened to Sebastian Thayler here tonight. Since then his manservant has had his throat slashed, and my friend Mr. Julius, whom many of you know, has disappeared. These have not been ordinary crimes. They have been cleverly timed and staged. I believe the killer is here, right here in this crowd facing me now. For him to have run away, would have been a confession of guilt. A dozen of you would know about it by now, know that someone was missing. That hasn't happened, so I say he is still here, standing among you, the blood of two and perhaps three men on his hands."

There was nothing in those faces; no sign of surprise, no sign of a willingness to coöperate.

"There is a certain safety in your numbers," Bradlen went on. "But if anyone of you knows anything, he will catch up with you, as he did with Montague and with my friend Julius. If there is one of you who can help us, talk now. You are safe here, with your friends about you."

A restless shuffling of feet on the dirt track, but silence.

"Do any of you know of a man in this crowd who once called himself Tex Larimee?"

Faces turned to look inquiringly at other faces, but there was no response.

"I'm certain, sir, that line of inquiry is fruitless," said Colonel Thorne under his breath. "The presence of a former picture star in this group would be known, would be known to all of us."

"Only," said Bradlen, "if the man *wanted* it known."

He raised his voice again. "I want help. You none of you seem willing. If I don't get that help, every blessed one of you will be taken into custody if we have to build a concentration-camp to hold you. You will be fingerprinted, your past lives gone into. Unless this is very different from most circus or carnival outfits, there are good many of you who would rather let the past stay buried. You've only got one chance: I want Julius. I want the murderer. I want every nook and cranny of this place, every thicket and clump of woods near by, searched. Julius is either being held prisoner, or he is dead. In either case he cannot be very far away. The murderer couldn't have risked being absent for too long. If you don't all of you turn to on this job, you will only have yourselves to blame for the results."

Then Bradlen felt a cool hand on his wrist. He looked down and saw Jill standing beside him, Buck at her elbow.

"Let me speak to them," she said.

Bradlen nodded.

"Listen, you twerps!" Jill said. "Inspector Bradlen is your friend. He came out here tonight because Buck Lawson was in a jam, and he was willing to help Buck. He kept the Sheriff from making a tragic mistake. Now what's happened? It's cost him perhaps the life of his friend.

"You dopes have been ducking and double-crossing the law for so long you'd do it in your sleep. You'll none of you be in the clear until this is settled, and Inspector Bradlen needs your help to do the settling. If any of you know anything about this Larimee business, say so."

"Never heard of him, Jill," someone called out.

"No dice, babe. He's not in this outfit," said another.

"Okay. Then the next step is to find Mr. Julius," Jill said. "Don't stand here gaping like a bunch of rubes! If you want to sleep, or eat or work for the next few weeks, step on it!"

Instantly the crowd began to break up. Someone shouted that they'd find Julius as soon as daylight broke.

Bradlen turned to Jill. "Thanks," he said wearily.

"Isn't there something we can do?" Jill asked.

"You can bring Buck along to the office-wagon," Bradlen said. "I'll want Speed there, and Fred Casey. I've got to begin all over again the job Julius started, ducking alibis. If I can get you people straightened out and in the clear, I'll have a few aides I can count on while we sift this mob. Because if we don't find the answer, we're going to have to go over them one by one if it takes a month!"

"We'll be there at once, Mr. Bradlen. And—and maybe Mr. Julius is all right."

Bradlen's lips tightened. "He had some cockeyed notion the murderer deserved a break. He didn't know about Montague. He probably walked right into a fast one."

SHORTLY afterward Bradlen sat at Colonel Thorne's desk in the office-wagon. The Colonel, Jill and Buck had taken the other chairs. Fred Casey sat on the edge of the cot, staring down between his knees at the floor. Speed stood by the door, cigarette in one corner of his mouth, his green eyes avoiding Buck and Jill.

Bradlen said: "You people here know everybody in this outfit. It looks as if we'd have to go about this in the long, hard way. I happen to know a good deal about the movements of all five of you tonight, so I want to deal with you first. As I told Jill, that will put you in the clear to help.

"There's a very tight time-schedule involved. After Thayler was found at nine-thirty, Fred came out to the hotel and brought me here. I talked to some of you and then went back to the hotel to interview Mrs. Thayler. I saw her and I talked to Montague. That was about twelve. When I came back, I talked to the Colonel, and then I saw you four at the drome. After that I returned to the hotel to see Montague again. He was dead. I found him about a quarter of two. So the murderer got at him sometime between twelve and the time I found him. For one of you to have killed Montague, you must have beaten me to the hotel, struck the instant you got there, and got back here a matter of minutes before I did. It could have been done, especially by you people at the drome, because I talked with the Colonel for about ten minutes when I got back."

The Colonel blew out his cheeks. "That seems to let me out," he said, "since I was sleeping when you returned. I trust you remember that."

"I remember," said Bradlen, "that you were lying on your cot. But let me get on with this: I am quite convinced that the same man did both murders. I am convinced Montague was murdered because he could have identified the killer. That's why I believe in this Larimee theory. If anyone recognized Larimee after Thayler's death, it was curtains. Larimee had sworn to get Thayler. So Larimee, who is passing as someone else in this outfit, *had* to get Montague out of the way. He had to run risks to do it, but he got away with it. Now, the point is this: If you have an alibi for either of these killings, you are in the clear."

"There's nothing to that, then," Speed spoke from the corner. "After you left here the first time, Jill, Lawson and I went to the drome. We were all three inside the drome from then until you came back after finding Montague."

"That's right," Buck said. "We never left the drome. Fred was right outside and can vouch for it, if our three say-sos aren't good enough."

Fred lifted his head. "It's a sure thing nobody came out of that drome at any time," he said.

Bradlen scratched on a piece of paper. "Here we have it," he said.

"Thayler's murder: Jill, no real alibi. Says she was at the bottom of the water-tower steps all the time, but there's no one who can positively testify.

"Buck: No alibi. He was one of the ones who materialized on the top of the tower to help remove Thayler's body. But nobody to testify when he went up.

"Speed: Same lack of alibi. He could have been on the tower when those kids discovered the body.

"Colonel Thorne: Was definitely seen at the bottom of the tower waiting for the body to be removed. On the basis of Jill's testimony that the murderer was on the tower balcony all the time, that seems to be an alibi."

Bradlen hesitated and looked at Casey. "Fred, we've never been into your alibi for the Thayler business."

Fred fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette. "I guess I aint got an alibi," he said.

"Don't be crazy," Buck said. "You were down in the sheds, working on our car."

"No, I wasn't, Buck, honest. The light was too poor. I guess I was just wanderin' around. No, I haven't got no alibi."

Buck stared at him hard. Then he laughed. "You damn' stubborn fool," he said. "Dish-washing!"

Fred gave him a sheepish grin. "Aw, hell, Buck!"

"This fathead," Buck said to Bradlen, "was washing dishes at Wee Willie's grease joint. He knows I don't like him to do it, so he didn't want to mention it."

"Wee Willie pays forty cents an hour," Fred said defensively. "If I work three hours, that means cigarette dough, and maybe some razor-blades or other stuff I need."

"Well, that seems to be that, Fred," Bradlen said. "So you and the Colonel are cleared on Round Number One. On Round Two:

"Jill: With Buck and Speed during time of Montague's killing.

"Buck: With Jill and Speed.

"Speed: With Jill and Buck.

"Fred: Sitting outside. Not the soundest alibi, but he's already cleared.

"Colonel Thorne: No alibi, but cleared in the first case.

"And that does it," Bradlen said. "You five are in the open." He sighed, and reached in his pocket for his pipe.

JILL was frowning. "I'd rather be shot than try to pin this on anyone, Mr. Bradlen, but you did mention Mrs. Thayler earlier in the evening. And she *could* have killed Montague without having to hurry back here."

"And how did she spirit away Julius?" he asked.

"Has it ever occurred to you," Speed asked, from the corner, "that this pal of yours who was so anxious to give the murderer a break might be hiding out on his own, just so he wouldn't have to answer questions?"

"That is the one thought," said Bradlen, "that has given me any hope. But he wouldn't have done that if he'd known about Montague. The minute he hears of it, he'll step out into the open, if he *is* concealing himself intentionally. Then the murderer, out there in that crowd pretending to search, will be waiting to pounce on him."

Jill turned to Buck. "You and Speed and Fred ought to be helping," she said.

"If we're free to go," Speed said.

"Go ahead," said Bradlen. "I'm staying put, so they'll know where to find me if there's anything to report."

Buck touched Jill's cheek with the back of his hand; then with Speed and Fred, he went out to join the searchers.

"You can do me a favor if you will," Bradlen said to Jill. "Just for the record, I'd like to check that dish-washing alibi of Fred's. Do you know this Wee Willie?"

"Of course. I eat at his place all the time."

"See if you can find him and verify the fact that Fred was working for him."

"I'll be glad to, Inspector. It'll check, all right. Fred is always picking up odd jobs, in spite of the way Buck feels about it."

The instant Jill had gone, Bradlen swung around on Colonel Thorne. "Well, Colonel?" he demanded. "What about it? Was I right?"

The Colonel mopped his face with a gaudy red bandanna. "I never would have guessed it, sir, but there's not the slightest doubt. Not the slightest doubt."

Bradlen started to the door. "Excuse me while I deliver a one-way ticket to the electric chair," he said grimly.

AS Jill walked along the deserted midway, light was appearing over the hills to the east. Everywhere men were shouting to each other, torches flickering, as they searched outbuildings and grounds, tents and concessions. Jill knew Wee Willie would be in the thick of it somewhere.

She was rounding the corner of the cookhouse when she heard quick, urgent footsteps behind her. She started to turn, when an arm went round her neck, and a hard hand covered her mouth.

"I don't want to hurt you, Jill. Don't make me hurt you," a voice whispered in her ear. "I got to get out of here, and that guy will be hot after me. I got to take you for insurance."

Jill tried to struggle, tried to scream. The arm grew tighter around her throat. She couldn't breathe.

"Don't make me hurt you!" the voice pleaded.

Tighter, tighter, that arm. Her frantic struggling had frightened the man. Then just when Jill thought it was the end, the arm loosed its pitiless hold and there was a cry of agony. Jill staggered forward and fell on her face. She rolled over and up, preparing to face her attacker.

It was Bradlen she saw—with fiercely angry eyes—standing over the sprawling figure of Fred Casey.

The detective reached down, caught Casey by the front of his shirt, and yanked him to his feet. His right fist traveled only inches before exploding squarely in the middle of Fred's mouth. The mechanic's head snapped back, his knees sagged.

"Now," said Bradlen, so softly that Jill could scarcely hear him, *"what have you done with Julius?"* . . . .

Bradlen slid back the bolt and lifted the sloping lid of the huge bin in the stable at the far end of the race-track. The look of concern on his face was slowly transformed into one of grim humor.

In the bin was bran, bushels of it—and the head of Mr. Julius. The head of Mr. Julius had a handkerchief bound tightly across the mouth. The eyes of Mr. Julius were baleful with fury.

"Justice, not only blind, but dumb!" Bradlen murmured.

Rumbling sounds came from behind the handkerchief gag. Bradlen paid no attention. With a feed measure he began the slow disinterment of Mr. Julius. It developed that Mr. Julius' hands and feet were firmly knotted with tie-ropes.

"Like a bantam rooster," said Bradlen viciously, "all ready for the pot." A pocket-knife severed the bonds. Mr. Julius, the instant his hands were free, ripped the handkerchief from his mouth. Words boiled out of him—colorful words, unprintable words. He jerked himself up, clambered out of the bin, dusting and beating at his clothes with flailing hands.

"Laugh!" he choked. "Laugh your fool head off! Always had a perverted sense of humor."

Bradlen reached down into the bin and fished out Mr. Julius' hat and umbrella. "You were born lucky, Julius," he said. "Your precious coddled murderer has killed another man, and came within a hair of finishing off Jill."

The old man stopped pummeling himself, to stare at Bradlen. "Great Scott!" he said, shaken.

"Fortunately for you," said Bradlen, "the crass, stupid police mind and police method saved you from having more blood on your hands than you could ever wash clear."

"Never expected to crawl to you, Bradlen," said the old man humbly. "I do. I was a fool. Tried to be the god in the machine. Got the answer by sheer luck. Thought he deserved a break."

"Luck?"

"Told you I never went to talking-pictures. Too hard to hear. I do see silent revivals. Weakness of mine. Like Westerns. Casey bothered me. I'd seen him before, but couldn't place where. Suddenly got it."

"Tex Larimee," Bradlen said.

"Right. How did you know? Never mind telling me. Remembered gossip at the time about a row. Larimee threatened to have Thayler's heart. Two and two made four. So I got smart."

"Oh, very smart," said Bradlen.

"Thought he deserved a break. Told him to get in his car—to scram! I'd give him a little start. He wouldn't. Said he'd have no chance if he skipped in the middle of your investigation. Insisted on waiting till you'd come a cropper. I refused. Couldn't double-cross you *that* way."

"How touching!"

"All right, *all right!* Dish it out. I can take it. Deserve it. He buried me in here. Who's dead?"

"Montague. His throat was neatly cut. It's a pity, Julius, because I think he and Ellen Thayler were on the verge of finding some peace and happiness together."

"And I did that!" Julius said bitterly.

"No, you didn't do that, Julius. Montague was dead before you made your little deal with Casey."

"Thank God," said Mr. Julius fervently. "On my honor, Bradlen, I hadn't hit on it till I saw him squatting outside the motordrome. Something in his attitude there brought the whole thing back to me. It hadn't clicked before."

"Come along," Bradlen said. "I only know a portion of the story myself. I didn't wait to get the rest. I thought,"—and he grinned for the first time—"you might be uncomfortable."

"Humph!" said Mr. Julius.

FRED CASEY sat on the cot in the office-wagon, staring down at the floor, as he had on another occasion. Sheriff Burns and a deputy were on either side of him. Buck, Jill, Speed and the Colonel were also there.

As Bradlen and Julius came in, Fred looked up at them.

"I'm sorry I had to be rough with you, old-timer," Fred said, "after you givin' me a break. It was the only way I could figger it."

From his pocket Bradlen took his pipe and began filling it. "You don't have to talk, you know, Fred," he said. "I'm going to tell you how I spotted you. Whether you tell us the rest is up to you." He paused to light the pipe.

"I had no definite ideas about the case, because there weren't any real clues," he said. "Any of you, or anyone else on the grounds tonight, might have been guilty. It wasn't until I called Hollywood on long distance that I began to have ideas. I heard about Tex Larimee. Where, I asked myself, would you be more likely to find an ex-cowboy and actor, down on his luck, than in a traveling carnival? It was so logical that it seemed a good deal better than a long shot. Working on that theory, it seemed to me at first that Tex Larimee might be you, or Speed, or Buck, or the Colonel, of our immediate suspects. That was before I thought about it very much. Then I suddenly realized that if the Larimee angle was right, Buck and Speed were out. *They weren't old enough to have been*

movie stars fifteen years ago! That narrowed it down to you or the Colonel, unless Larimee was a complete unknown amongst the show-people.

"You had no real alibi for the second killing. You were sitting *outside* the drome. You could have come and gone almost at will—and you *did*. You had never offered an alibi for Thayler's murder. I haven't checked on this dishwashing gag, but of course it won't stand up.

"However, I was able to satisfy myself that Colonel Thorne could not have killed Thayler. So before we assembled for questioning here, I told him I suspected you were Larimee. He thought I was crazy, but he watched you, and finally realized that though you were older, that your face had hollowed out through the loss of teeth, that your hair was cut differently, that you had put on weight—he realized that you were Larimee. I didn't need any more evidence, Fred. I knew then that your dishwashing story wouldn't hold up; that you would have to take quick action to cover yourself and get away. That's why I hopped right out on your trail. It was fortunate I did, for Jill and perhaps for Julius."

"I wouldn't've hurt him," Fred said dully. "I'd've just left him where he was. I only wanted time to get away."

"Will you tell the story, Fred, or shall I?"

"There's no reason not to talk," Fred said. "When I saw Thayler at the fair the other day, I figured the chance I'd been waiting for for years was here."

"WHY not begin at the beginning, Fred?" Bradlen asked, quietly.

Casey's head came up. "The beginning?"

"You had tried to kill Thayler once before," Bradlen said. "At Reno, Nevada, wasn't it—four years ago?"

There was a sharp intake of breath behind the detective. He turned, saw Buck's fingers, laced in Jill's, were white.

Fred looked straight at Buck. "I guess it has to come out," he said. "Before God, Buck, I never meant to do you no harm. I've tried every way I knew how since, to make it up to you. It wasn't no accident, my meetin' up with you at Syracuse when I did. I was huntin' for you. I read about what happened to you, and I figured I owed it to you to string along with you."

"I don't understand," Buck said in a tight voice.

"It's simple enough," Fred said. "After Thayler gave me the business in Hollywood, I bummed around. Got jobs as a mechanic here and there. Finally I landed a job at that private air-field in Reno. When Thayler turned up that day, he left orders for his ship to be serviced, and said he was flyin' on to Hollywood in a few hours. I figured he'd be alone, just the way he was when he come in. So—so I fixed his altimeter so he'd never make it!"

"God! Oh, God!" Buck said.

"Then things got mixed up. He picked up some friends. He sent to the municipal airport for a pilot. I didn't have no chance to change things then. I couldn't say nothin' without hangin' for it. So I—I let it ride. After that I—well, I figured I owed you something. I couldn't fix things for you, but I *could* help the best I knew how."

There was a silence except for Buck's heavy breathing.

"It's goin' to be all right now, Buck," Fred said, almost eagerly. "You'll be able to clear yourself. It's goin' to be all right for you and Jill."

Buck couldn't speak.

"Tonight," Bradlen prompted, "you heard Bob Yerkes talking about the date Jill had made with Thayler. It gave you a ready-made stage."

"That's right," Fred said, still looking unhappily at Buck. "I waited for him up there. When he saw me, he was scared. God, I got a kick out of that! The white-livered louse was scared! 'Oh, it's you!' he said, trying to be casual. He started to back away, but I grabbed him and yanked him around the balcony out of sight." A nerve was throbbing in Fred's temple. "I told him I'd been waitin' twelve years to meet up with him alone. Then he did fall apart. He opened his mouth to yip, and I slugged him. His knees gave way a little, and before he could clear his head, I tipped him over into the water!" Fred's clenched fists relaxed. "I stood there while he screamed and clawed at the side of the tank—and then gave up. I felt good for the first time in twelve years!"

Bradlen's face was angular and hard. He said nothing. After a moment Fred went on:

"I waited till these kids gave the alarm. It was kind of ticklish, but it worked out. Nobody told you I was one of the ones up there, did they, Inspector? No one noticed. Not even Buck. They were all concentratin' on Thayler. I figured I was in the clear till they pinched Buck. That was bad." His voice broke. "Honest to God, Buck, I'd of done anythin' for you. I—" He sighed as he saw Buck's frozen expression. "I didn't see how you could catch up with me, Inspector, but I figured you might be able to clear Buck. That's why I came after you.

"Well, then you got talkin' to Jill, and when I realized you were goin' back to put the heat on Montague, I had to move fast. He knew me. I didn't know if he'd keep his mouth shut, or if he'd squeal. I had to find out. You stopped to talk to Bob Yerkes. I hot-footed it for the hotel. I saw Montague. He said: 'I knew it was you all the time.' 'Will you keep your mouth shut?' I asked him. 'Unless they put the heat on me,' he said. 'I can't cover for you, Larimee, because Ellen and I—' Well, anyhow, the reason Thayler had given Montague the works was because Montague had had the nerve to be decent to Ellen when she was half out of her mind over the way she was bein' treated.

"I had to think fast, Inspector. I'd come too far—run too many risks—to let one man stand in the way of my goin' free. So—so I killed him. I slipped out of the room and only just missed walkin' smack into Ellen Thayler. I heard her go into the room as I was makin' for the back stair. It was close. I guess you was down in the lobby then, telephonin' Hollywood. Anyhow, I had plenty of time to get back here and be sittin' outside the drome when you turned up again.

"That's all, I guess, except about Mr. Julius. He comes up and starts talkin' to me. All of a sudden he says: 'You're Tex Larimee! You killed him.'" Fred shook his head, puzzled. "That was close, too. I almost let him have it then and there. But he says: 'Get goin'. Thayler deserved it. I'll give you an hour's start before I talk to Bradlen.' I couldn't go. You'd've had me like that! But he'd give me a break, so I give him one. Not many people treat you white the way he did. Not many people would understand what's burnin' a guy up inside.... Buck, listen—if there was any way I could've cleared you without hangin'—if there was any way—" Fred was on his feet. The Sheriff and the deputy closed in on him. He relaxed. "I guess you better take me wherever you're plannin' to, Sheriff. I'd kind of like to get away from here." He paused beside Buck, tapped him gently on the chest with his closed fist. "Good luck, lead-foot! You and her can start ridin' some place else beside nowheres."

IN the early morning sunlight Mr. Julius and Bradlen walked along the country road to the hotel.

"Fellow's a paranoid," Mr. Julius said. "Hates like hell. Loves like hell. He may get off. Insanity."

"Mercy, I hope not," said Bradlen. "Two people in that plane died, Julius. Montague died! Buck Lawson's life was ruined for four years, Ellen Thayler's perhaps forever. All to accomplish one isolated piece of revenge. No, Julius, he must pay!"

Mr. Julius took a deep sniff of the fresh morning air. "Anyway, those kids are straightened out. Good kids. Go places."

"It's been a night's work, Julius. Perhaps the fates will smile on me today. Perhaps I'll get by that blasted seventh hole without hitting double figures!"

A Yankee Doctor in Paradise

Excerpts from the fascinating life-story of a South Seas hero.

by S. M. LAMBERT, M. D.

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LAMBERT, I've got a good one for you this time. I'm sending you to Papua."

Dr. Victor G. Heiser, the Rockefeller Foundation's famous Director of the East, made this announcement as if Papua were across the street.

"That's fine, Doctor," I said, "perfectly fine."

Papua? Where was Papua? Vainly I fished for scraps of geography and pulled up impressions of palmy islands where black warriors asked guests how they liked their missionary, rare or well done.

Dr. Heiser sat behind a modest desk in one of the smallest rooms at 61 Broadway, delivering a sort of curtain speech to an act that had taken longer than a Chinese play, an act which had played through the war summer of 1918. I had finally found a successor and resigned my superintendency of the United Fruit Company's hospital in Costa Rica; I was in New York to offer my services. But Uncle Sam wasn't looking for medical officers with weak eyes. . . .

No, the hereditary Lambert is not a geographer. We are a homebody family, and I often wonder how the colonial Lamberts ever found courage to cross over from England to seventeenth-century New Jersey. They certainly stayed put when they got here; nothing but hunger and Indian raids could budge them. My father, who was a tanner and often used his best leather trying to teach me civility, was looked upon as something of a sea rover because he once drove mules along the Delaware and Hudson Canal towpath. Relatives in Ellenville, New York, where I was born, paled when they learned that Father was moving us to Little Falls.

Our pious Methodists always regarded Father as a freethinker; and wasn't it like him to want Sylvester to be a doctor? Mr. Babcock, head of our Free Academy in West Winfield, was even more radical. A boy ought to have a college education before he started studying medicine. I had worked with the tannery gang long enough, and had learned too many of the rich, brown oaths they spat out with their chewing tobacco. Hamilton College was the place to smooth me out for medical school. Hamilton College! My mother's hands went up at the spectral idea of a place so remote that Sylvester would have to go overnight, by train.

I entered with the class of 1903, and the thought of all my father sacrificed to send me there made me a rather earnest student—that, and his threat of more tannery, if I didn't make good. I am thankful that Hamilton and the Syracuse Medical, which I later attended, were both small, for in small classes the instructor knows the needs and failings of every student. I was a hard worker, but not a grind. I found time for football, which toughened the tannery boy for harder years to come. Trips with the team to rival colleges were early adventures in foreign travel. Colgate, swollen with toothpaste money, was easy fruit for us then. Williams rubbed our noses in the mud to the tune of 4-0—and I wept, limping off the field.

Sometimes in my late middle age I awake from sleep swearing. I have been dreaming of a game with the Carlisle Indians. That big Injun, Red Water, is on the line opposite me, tall as a church, never losing his grin. The ball is snapped and his long arm reaches tenderly over me, gets the seat of my britches. . . .

In 1904 I was prepared for Johns Hopkins, but Mother wanted to know what I'd be doing with myself, 'way over in Maryland. Syracuse was in New York State, anyhow, and that was far enough for anybody. . . .

Toward the end of my third year my brother became

seriously ill, and I had to take him to Arizona. There I discovered, to my bald astonishment, that this Lambert had a wandering foot. In Tucson I obeyed a mad impulse and joined the crazy medical unit of a construction gang, working down the West Coast of Mexico. I had time to grow romantic when I came to the fine old hacienda of Mr. Eugene Tays, an American mining engineer. The dark eyes of his pretty daughter, Eloisa, melted my every ambition to go home and plug again at a stiff medical course. She was half Spanish, one of the influential Vegas around San Blas; but she had enough Scotch common sense to tell me to go home and graduate. When I had a practice of my own, she said, I could come back and marry her. She had to wait five years, but she kept her promise. . . .

Several years later, I was admitted to the Costa Rica Medical Faculty, after another feat of intensive cramming. Costa Rican professional standards are high, and not too friendly to Yankee doctors. Though I passed the very severe examination, I am not sure it was my learning that won my degree; my initiation included many cocktails with a great many influential medical officers. Those things help in Central America.

That was in the calmer period, following four years in Mexico, where I practised medicine between raids by Carranzistas, Villistas, Yaquis. Twice I established myself with my wife and baby on the West Coast, near Eloisa's home. Twice, because the United States Navy ordered us to escape with our lives, we left the country as refugees.

Those years were heavy with adventure. . . .

One adventure I might record, if briefly. The dreaded Yaquis had joined forces with General Obregón. Colonel Antunez, like a good fellow, was bossing the Indians. They had been letting us alone at Mochis, but danger was always brooding in a place that never knew which side it was on. One day, to my discomfiture, this Colonel Antunez came limping in. He complained of pain in his groin, and a large swelling indicated an operation. He urged me to be quick; he had to be at the front, he was the only man whom Obregón trusted with the wild Yaquis.

When I got in with the knife I found a tumor that extended into the big blood vessels. Removing it was a serious major operation. As soon as he was out from under the anesthetic the war horse snorted again. He must be up and back at the front. I told him that his condition necessitated three weeks of complete rest; he got so excited that his temperature shot up and I had to stop arguing. As he recovered, his officers and their Yaquis were always around.

ONE morning I found his bed empty. They had smuggled him away in a jolting truck, through a cold rain. He died at Navajoa, of peritonitis or phlebitis, one of the inevitable results.

Next day I was called to the office of His Honor, the *Síndico* of Mochis, and was surprised by a captain's tap on my shoulder. I was under arrest. It was a long trip toward the death-house. They jailed me first at Mochis, where I managed to have three words with Meade Lewis, a little red-headed friend of mine who was American consul. I told him what I guessed: I was booked to be shot because one of Obregón's most valued officers had died after my operation.

My tumbrel to Topolobampo was a track car, bristling with rifles; half the population and their dogs tagged along for a look at the gringo who was going to be tried—which was a synonym for being executed. I had been allowed one glance at Eloisa and our baby. The cell in which I spent ten days was a Yaqui butcher shop when it wasn't occupied by the condemned. Into a fragrance of spoiled meat my jailor came at last to inform me that the trial and shooting were set for Saturday morning. And here it was Friday.

On Saturday morning I had prepared my sinful Methodist-born soul for a stern hereafter, when the officer in command swung wide the door, saluted deferentially and proclaimed, "Doctor, you are free!"

Not until I had rejoined my family did I learn what this, or anything else, was about. I had become an international affair, they said. Consul Meade Lewis had fairly pulled the cables loose between Topolobampo and Washington. William Jennings Bryan had sent a cruiser down from San Diego. The captain of that cruiser burned the wires to Mexico City with a Richard Harding Davis sort of message: "Release Lambert at once or I'm coming to get him."

It made a ripping newspaper story. Away up in Newark my brother Fred had been visiting some Mexican friends who told him how wonderfully I was doing in Mochis. After the party Fred passed a subway news-stand and saw the black headline, "JAIL DOOR SWINGS WIDE FOR LAMBERT." He was proud of the family when he read how William Jennings Bryan had taken steps.

(Dr. Lambert went to Papua for the Rockefeller Foundation; and after extensive studies of hookworm infestation and other tropical afflictions there, journeyed to many of the smaller South Seas Islands to carry on his devoted studies.)

CHAPTER VIII

I SAY IT IN PIDGIN

AT last the time came when my vanity was tickled to the verge of hysteria; I had actually learned pidgin English. To the native English is pidgin, and if you do not speak it with classic exactitude he simply fails to understand you. Once I had thought that I could pick it up in a week or two, it sounded so like laundry Chinese. Studying it, I learned how iron-bound its rules of idiom and grammar actually are. Twice, before I had mastered the lingo, I had tried it on native audiences and had been, as the actors say, laughed off the stage. But I was tired of having my lectures hashed by casual interpreters; I knew that I must talk straight to the people in the trade language which was common over the larger part of Melanesia. It took a year of hard grinding to learn it. Superior natives, kindly missionaries and District Officers were my tutors.

I must be fair to the reader and show him a few of the simpler twists in the language, and interpret a few peculiarities. Otherwise, the forthcoming sample of what became my standard pidgin hookworm lecture might be difficult to understand.

The verb "go," for instance. The future is "by-and-by me go," and the past is "me go finish." "Finish" is trickily used to express finality. When a boy is "dead finish" he is dead. When you bury a body you "plant 'im finish." (When a houseboy says he is "killed" it merely means that his mistress has taken a stick to him.)

"Him" is masculine, feminine or neuter, generally pronounced "im," but sometimes "um." "Im" may be joined to a verb, as in "lookim," or separated as in "look im," ("look at him").

"Fellow" or "feller" is another tricky one. "Feller" precedes almost every noun—"One feller house," and so on. "Me go three feller Sunday" means "I was gone three weeks."

A man is usually a "boy," a woman a "mary." But often, linguistically, a man's a "man," for a' that. The personal pronoun is always masculine: "Dis feller mary he go." Repetition gives a verb an increasing value. When you say, "He go, go, go, *go*, GO," that's a long, tired journey. Then for effect you add, "long way too much." "Too much" means "very." Example: "Him good feller too much"—quite a compliment.

"Senake" is "snake" or "worm," and in hookworm lectures you refer to hatched larvae as "pickaninny senake." "Gelass" is "glass," and refers to a microscope, telescope or anything else with a lens in it.

The frequent use of "belong" (or "belonga") is confusing, and "along" is worse. Loosely speaking, "belong" is possessive. "Knifie belong me" is "my knife" and about the only way to translate "Dis fellow knifie belong dis fellow mary belong house belong Keop" would be "The knife of the native woman who lives in the Captain's house"—a pretty clumsy way of making your point. "Along" generally expresses movement or approach: "Ship stop along place." On some remote islands, God is expressed by "Big Feller Walk along Top."

"Blut" is blood (German), and is combined with "sabe" (Spanish) in "You altogether fellow, you sabe string belong blut?" when you want to know if everybody understands the nature of the blood stream. "Altogether fellow" expresses "everybody."

"Kaikai" is "eat." Your heart is a "pump," your lungs "wind," and when you show a hookworm picture in your lecture the "illustration" is a "ficshure."

Their use of "behind" doesn't express much until you are informed that it may mean either "afterward" or "pretty soon." "Behind me show you dis feller" equals "After I have shown you this."

To the uninitiated, pure pidgin does not make the slightest sense. German priests have learned it—and naïvely used its Chaucerian obscenities—without knowing a word of English.

In giving you just a flash of my first public success with the language, I assure you that I have anglicized it down to a point where the pidgin-wise native would have a hard time making head or tail out of it. But head or tail would be lost to the reader if I gave the unedited version.

WHEN I returned to the native hospital at Rabaul and told Colonel Honman that I was prepared to lecture in pidgin, he gnashed pleasantly and said, "Try it on them." Honman was behind me in everything now.

A packed audience was gathered that night to hear my attempt at a new and dreadful language. I mopped cold sweat from my bald spot. Jerope had hung the hookworm chart to a post; it was like nailing your flag to the mast—fight or sink, no turning back. Assistants had passed around our two property bottles, pickled hookworms and ascarides. The natives always admired the bottled ascarides most; they were larger and looked more dangerous. The pause settled my stomach. My natural brazenness returned and I bawled for order.

"You altogether boy, you listen good. Me come talk along one big feller sick . . ."

I felt the listening silence. They were taking in every word.

"Altogether boy he got um plenty senake he stop along inside bell' belong boy, he kaikai bell', blut he come, he kaikai blut. Blut belong boy him kaikai belong senake.

"Place belonga me him stop long way too much. You ketchum one feller steamer, you go one feller Sunday, now you come up along Sydney. Now you ketchum one feller steamer, big more (larger), now you go, go, go three feller Sunday, now you come up along place belong me. . . ."

In the native mind I had visualized the distance I had traveled from New York to New Guinea. And now for a word picture of John D. Rockefeller, Senior:

"Master belonga me him make im altogether kerosene, him make im altogether benzine. Now he old feller. He got im plenty too much belong money. Money belong him allesame dirt. Now he old feller, close up him he die finish. He look about. Him he tink, 'Me like make im one feller something, he good feller belong altogether boy he buy im kerosene belonga me.' Now Gubment (Government) he talk along master belonga me. Master belonga me him he talk, 'You, you go killim altogether senake belong bell' belong boy belong island.' "

(I passed around the bottle of pickled hookworms.)

"Now, you boy, lookim good along dis feller bottle. Dis small feller senake he bad feller too much. . . . He got im tooth belongim. He kaikai bell' belong altogether boy. Blut he come he kaikai blut . . ."

(Turning chart to enlargement of male and female hookworms.)

"You look along dis feller ficshure. Two feller senake. You look; one feller he man-senake, one feller him he mary-senake. Dis feller mary, him he bad feller too much. Him he stop along inside bell'; him he kaikai blut; him he makim too much small feller egg. Boy he makim something along ground. Egg he come out. Dis egg he small feller too much. . . ."

OPEN eyes and open mouths confronted me. And now to describe a microscope in pidgin English:—

"He no allesame glass belong Keop (Captain) belong steamer—he nother kind. Glass belong Keop, he make one feller something he stop too far, more big; glass belonga me, he make one feller something too small, more big. Behind (pretty soon) you sabe lookim along dis feller glass . . ."

(Attentive eyes followed the microscope, and I told of the dropping of the egg, the birth of the larva and its destiny . . .)

"Now boy he make im something along ground, egg he come out. Rain he come down. Egg, him he stop. Now sun he cookim. Now small feller pickaninny (larva), close up he broke-im dis feller egg. Him, he walkabout along ground, quick feller too much. You no sabe lookim—he small feller too much. Eye belonga you no good. Now boy he come. Him he putim foot belongim along ground. Now pickaninny senake him come inside foot belong boy, quick feller too much. Boy he scratchim, but he no can catchim dis feller senake. Now he go along string belong blut. Now he go, he go, he go, he go, go go go, now he come up along pump belong blut; now he come to wind; him he come up along troat; boy he kaikai him. . . ."

(Pointing to internal organs outlined on the chart.)

"Now he come along bell' belong you, now he big feller little bit; now he gettim tooth belong im; now he sabe kaikai bell' belong boy; he sabe kaikai blut. Suppose you gottim plenty good kaikai—dis feller kaikai no belong you; him belong senake. You eatim, senake he catchim first time . . .

"Senake him kaikai blut belong boy, now boy he no strong; he weak feller too much; him he no like walkabout; him he no like work; him he like sleep all time. Bell' belong him no good, skin belong him no good, leg belong him allesame stick, him rotten altogether because senake he kaikai bell' belongim. . . . Blut belongim water; quick time boy he die finish; now he go along ground.

"Now master belonga me he gottim one good feller medicine. You drinkim one time, behind (afterward) you takim one salts medicine; senake he die finish, he come outside. Now, kaikai belong boy, he no belong senake. Now quick time skin belong boy good, now he sabe walkabout, him he strong feller too much. . . ."

When at last I had finished I heard the frightened sigh that fluttered through my audience. A heavy load seemed to fall from my shoulders. I had said it in pidgin, I had made them understand!

This was the hookworm lecture which, with some improvements, I gave hundreds of times throughout Melanesia, wherever pidgin was spoken; in New Guinea, in the Solomon Islands, in the New Hebrides. Yes, and I took it to New York in 1922, and demonstrated it to the Rockefeller Foundation. When I was asked to address a body of extremely dignified scientific men, Dr. George Vincent encouraged me to repeat my hookworm lecture, for its fame seemed to have arrived before I did. "Give it to them straight," Dr. Heiser suggested when I took the platform. If my performance added nothing to science, it was at least a comedy success. It panicked 'em, as the actors say. When I came to the part that described Mr. Rockefeller as "Master belonga me him make im altogether kerosene . . .

Now he old feller. . . . Money belong him allesame dirt," solemn scientists who hadn't smiled for years had to be held up to keep them from falling into the aisles.

Chapter XIII

HOW THE ANSWER CAME

ONE late afternoon in February, 1922, I keeled back in my office chair and appreciated the soreness a middle-aged prize fighter must feel after he has taken the count in round one. With a sanitary squad of nine native and Indian assistants and the invaluable Chris Kendrick I had again made a round and seen the dank hopelessness of two races weakened by their own customs and by the unfriendly acts of nature. . . .

And the discouraging thing was this: despite the crucial need of hygienic improvements, an effective cure must take first place as an educational demonstration. If you destroy all the hookworms inside the human body, no more of their eggs will fall to the ground to hatch the larvae that make the worms that suck the blood. . . . The whole Jack-built song of consequences with a tropical setting. Sounds very simple, doesn't it? So does astronomy.

I sat at my desk, facing facts and not liking a single one of them. Evening was coming on and I should have been home for dinner. I was too sick of myself and my work to move a muscle. Three more years of this, and where would it get us? Nowhere.

Maybe it was my guardian angel who stole up and laid a still hand over mine. Without knowing what I did or why I did it, I moved my hand across the desk and woke, blinking. I had picked up the *Journal of the American Medical Association,* a November 1921 issue, and an invisible finger seemed to point the page for me. And there was the title: "The Use of Carbon Tetrachloride in the Removal of Hookworm . . . by Maurice C. Hall." Hall was the man who approved my experiment down in Rabaul when I gave those injections to six cannibal prisoners. I respected him, as most of the profession did. As Senior Zoologist of the United States Bureau of Animal Industry, his researches had gone far in his own field. He didn't talk unless he knew what he was talking about.

Here was Hall's report in the modest gray of scientific language, revealing years of most careful observation. His tests had led him to a novel drug—carbon tetrachloride. Queer, humble thing to have fished out of the pharmacopoeia! Hitherto it had been useful only in dry-cleaning fluids and fire extinguishers. He had observed that patients under chloroform anesthesia frequently emit a number of intestinal parasites. Chloroform, then, would be a successful vermifuge were it not for its poisonous qualities. Hall made hundreds of tests down the list of Hydrocarbons until he came to chloroform's close relation. Chloroform's chemical initials are $CHCl_3$. Tetrachloride's laboratory name is CCl_4.

Tetrachloride touched the spot Hall had been looking for. He tried it first on dogs, then on swine, horses, monkeys. He carefully gauged the dosage to 3 cc. for every 10 pounds of animal weight; later he found that 0.3 cc. to every kilogram of body-weight expelled the worms in surprising quantities. After treatment he had performed post-mortems on many animals and had examined internal organs which showed no pathological changes that could be traced to CCl_4. In animal experimentation it had been an unqualified success.

In animals, yes. But what of man?

The answer came like a clap of thunder out of Hall's quietest paragraph. *He had tried the stuff on himself.* Audaciously he had taken a 3 cc. dose, gone to bed and wakened in the morning with no pathological symptoms. The dangerous drops he had swigged the night before had had none of the nauseous effects of chenopodium. His animal experiments had shown him that it worked as fast, as safely and more thoroughly. . . .

The message of tetrachloride came to me like an answer to prayer. But would the dog-cure turn out to be a man-killer? Probably not. *Hall had tried it on himself.*

With a hop, skip and jump I went to the laboratory used by the Medical Officer of Health. Naturally old Carment, who presided over the collection, wouldn't have the drug. Why should he? Yes, but there it was! A big, brown bottle with the label CCl_4. It had never been opened, of course, and how it got there nobody knows. Strange, useless things drift onto laboratory shelves.

When I went up to Dr. Montague's office I had the brown bottle under one arm and the *Medical Journal* under the other. "Read that and look at this," I said. He read the article painstakingly, then turned the bottle in his hand. "Lambert, try anything," he sighed. That was about the way we all felt those days. . .

So we were trying to cure hookworm disease with a cleaning fluid. A veterinary had recommended it. True, he was about the greatest vet in the world. I have to laugh now, remembering how we, as green young undergraduates at Syracuse Medical, used to snoot veterinaries and dentists as "hoss doctors" and "tooth yankers." We didn't take the trouble to remember that modern anesthesia originated in a dentist's brain. And since we lacked the gift of prophecy, how were we to know what a horse doctor would someday do with something out of a fire extinguisher?

My mind was made up, but my heart wasn't doing any too well when I went to the native ward and picked out four hookwormy East Indians. . . . At seven next morning my faltering hand administered to each of them 3 cc. out of the brown bottle. The minute they swallowed it I felt like a Borgia. It was too late to do anything about it, unless I gave them a quick emetic. If tetrachloride went back on me I'd be responsible for the death of a man, maybe four. . . .

Dr. Hall had taken a dose of it.

Yes, but Hall had been in the prime of health, able to throw off toxic poisoning. These poor fellows were like dry leaves. The very thing that made treatment necessary had weakened them to the exhaustion point. . . . Then I thought: Even if I had drugged myself with the stuff it wouldn't have proved much; what I was trying to find out was its actual effect on hookworm. . . .

I had wandered back to my office, hoping that solitude and a cigarette might tell me what to do next. . . . The door burst open and Chris Kendrick tumbled in on me. His look was grave as he said, "That tetrachloride—"

"Are they dead?" I asked stiffly.

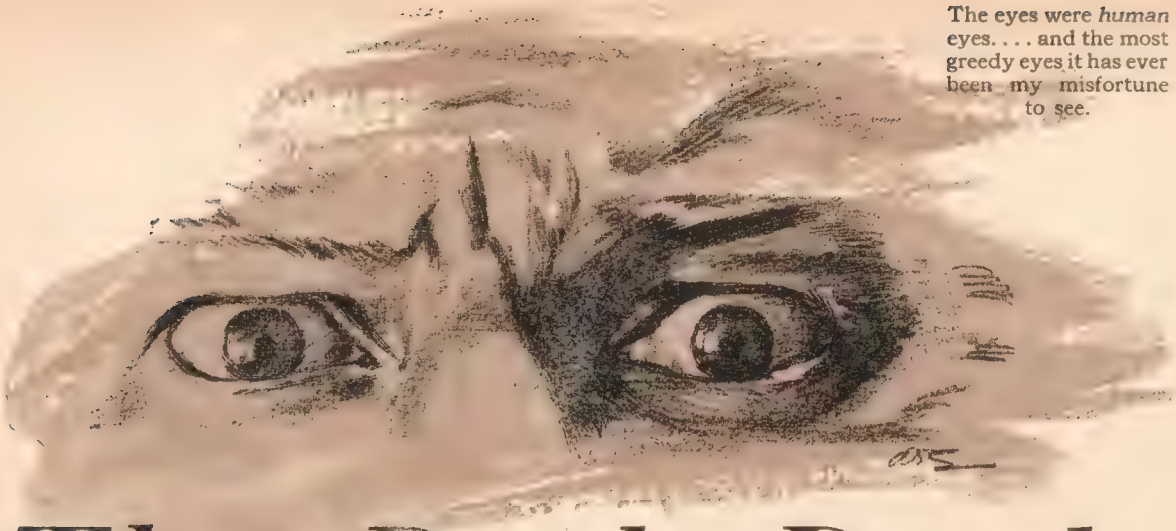
"Dead!" Chris waved his hands. "They're all jumping out of bed."

I had gambled with four lives, and won.

WHEN the tidings came to Washington, friendly biologists crowded Dr. Maurice C. Hall's office to congratulate him, and his reply was characteristic. "You say I've been curing hookworm in Fiji? Hell, I've never been near the place."

What a wizard he was, this pre-eminent zoologist, who was Washington's Number One horse doctor! Every pet dog wags his tail (or should) in gratitude for his two deworming remedies. The dog's pal, the human, is Hall's debtor—all but the fur dealers. The price of silver fox has taken a terrific slump. Do you know why? Dr. Hall sent his tetrachlorides to the fox farms where so many hookwormy bitches and pups used to die that pelts had become a luxury for the wives of steel barons. When Hall's treatments came to Foxville the breed picked up rapidly and its fur went to the lower department stores; so now every stenographer can have her silver fox—and on her own salary, too. Ask your furrier.

Another excerpt from a new book of special interest will appear in our next issue.



The eyes were *human* eyes. . . . and the most greedy eyes it has ever been my misfortune to see.

The Pink Duck

A "brain machine" as well as the pink duck make this murder mystery unique.

by

Fulton Grant

WE'D have never known nor heard of Dr. Maurice Fitzjames; nor should we ever have had contact with him, dead or alive, had it not been for Bab's passion for pawnshops.

Bab is my small daughter, aged fifteen. Her real name, of course, is Barbara, but she prefers the babyhood diminutive. For my part, I prefer it too, since Barbara was her departed mother's name.

As to her passion for pawnshops, the alliteration must be expanded to include junk-shops, antique shops—indeed, secondhand establishments of all kinds. During our years in Europe Bab discovered the *marchés-aux-puces* and reveled in them. Since in America there are no flea-markets worthy the name, she has fastened upon our only substitutes.

She prowls for such places. Much of her time and most of her allowance is spent in them. And our residences, however temporary and small, are sure to be crowded with "discoveries."

We lived for a few months in Marrakech while I worked on sketches for some murals for a Near East foundation, and it was there that Bab acquired her technique for shopping in the bazaars. At home again, she has applied this technique to domestic shops with conspicuous success.

"Major dear," she said one day in a sweetly dangerous way I have learned to fear, and calling me by a title long since forgotten by all save my daughter and her friends, "do you think I'm a good investment as a daughter?"

I bit. I usually do. "You'll pass," I countered, "as filial investments go. Why?"

"Because I need five dollars."

"Why, you got your allowance only Wednesday," I commented. The sum surprised me a little, for the girl seldom demands more than small silver.

"It's awfully important, Major. You see, I've found the most wonderful junkie on Cornelia Street, and—"

"And you've discovered an original Voltaire manuscript or a Matisse *inedit*, or the boy Marconi's very first radio, or—"

"Please, Daddy!" She was on the verge of tears which might have been the envy of any crocodile, and so I capitulated. It came out that in this junk-shop she had found a machine. Better, call it a "thing." It was like a phonograph, she said, only it wasn't a phonograph. Also it was like a radio, only it wasn't a radio. It had a turntable and a box of homemade records and lots of radio tubes in it, but it wasn't like anything she had ever seen or heard of, and she was sure it was a working model of some poor genius' invention, sadly gone the way of the junk-shop. Anyhow, it was "wonderful." And so she got her five dollars.

I ought to explain at this point that among the rather extraordinary hobbies of my incredible daughter is radio. This is a new development, begun since our return to America. Upstairs in the apartment overhead lives a young man named Charley Oster who is a licensed radio amateur, albeit only sixteen himself, and who has somehow been able to fascinate Bab with his maze of apparatus, all homemade. Life has become a problem for me, since the two of them spend late hours making howls and squeals come out of a loud-speaker or tapping Morse code at each other with spoons on Charley's kitchen table right over the room I use for a studio. . . .

The thing of wonder arrived that afternoon in Charley Oster's car. I was present at the ceremony of opening the new-found "treasure." It consisted chiefly of a metallic box on top of which was a phonograph turntable, and containing all manner of knobs, dials and controls. With this was another box containing exactly forty-one small five-inch acetate records of the home-recording, pre-grooved type. But do not make the error of supposing that the thing turned out to be a phonograph after all. It did nothing of the kind. It turned out to be something so remote from the realm of accepted probability that my own poor brain still staggers and reels at the thought of it.

They began—I might almost say "we" began—by putting one of the records on the turntable and trying to play it. It did not play. The first of a

long series of shocks came when we discovered that there was no loud-speaker out of which any sound could come, and that the queer-looking copper bands attached to electric wires could not be thought of as a substitute for earphones, and thus that although the phonograph arm and pick-up was quite ordinary and the records quite real, the machine could not—or did not—reproduce them in any way understandable to two young people and an electrically ignorant artist of forty.

Next, of course, I offered my own excellent electric phonograph for the experiment. Evidently the records were neither blanks nor dummies, for they all bore hand-written labels pasted on their centers—labels, may I say, which were not the least of the mysteries contained in this mysterious find of my daughter Babs.

However, though needle-scratch was heard, and a faint humming sound came from my phonograph, no noise recognizable as speech or music could be got out of those records. And hence I was drawn against my own will and by my curiosity into this puzzle.

Let me quote one or two titles from those records. One read:

"Dream. Anger precipitate. Boston, March 4, 1939."

And another: *Memo. Will. Mack. Must. August 7, 1939*

Still another: *Memo. Fellowship. Dynamotive brain. November 2, 1939.*

There were twenty-four of these records labeled, *"Memo. Fellowship."* There were eleven marked, *"Dream."* The rest were labeled simply, *"Memo."*

But my two young "experts" found the purely mechanical and electrical features of the device quite as puzzling as the records. As I have said, there was all the apparatus of a phonograph, but no loud-speaker by which to produce sound. The curved bands of copper at the end of silk-covered electric cables were as obscure to them as they were to me. Charley Oster proclaimed that the array of radio tubes formed an amplifier circuit, and: "If we could get a sound out of it, I bet it would shake the whole house."

But we got no sound at all.

Now I am a fairly busy man as painters go, and I left the young people in the library tinkering with their find while I returned to my studio. I had become absorbed in my work when I heard Charley Oster's voice shouting my name. I ran. I feared that Bab had got shocked seriously by the devilish thing she had found.

But she had not. I found her squatting on the floor with the machine's two copper bands strapped to her curls with a rubber band, and wearing the most amazed and perplexed expression I had ever seen upon her pretty face.

"Major! Major!" she cried in an excited whisper. "It does play. It really does—only—only I can't hear it; I can only feel it. It puts something into my head. It's—it's incredible! Here, you try it, Daddy!"

And of course I did.

The record which was on the turntable was one of the series labeled *"Dream."* As soon as the coppers were tied to my somewhat skeptical head, I began to experience a miracle—no other word for it. I did not hear; I felt. Was it speech or thought? I do not know. Had it form, or was it formless? That too is beyond me. All I know is that when that record began to "play," I experienced the sensation of a man asleep and wandering in that remote and nebulous land of subconscious fancy which, wanting better terms, we call dream.

Let me digress a little and give you a brief description of that dream; for curiously, it plays a part in the subsequent developments of this story: I was on a ship. We had arrived at a home port. Uniformed officials were demanding passports and such documents. I did not have any passport. I found myself saying to an official that the purser had taken my papers at the embarkation point and had not yet returned them to me.

And then quite suddenly the official turned into a duck!

Let me explain that while his general likeness was the distorted caricature of a duck, he also preserved a semi-human appearance. The color was pink. So was the uniform. But the eyes were *human* eyes, very blue, and the most greedy eyes it has ever been my misfortune to see in my life.

Said the pink duck:

"Certainly, Doctor, your passport was taken. I took it myself. I was the purser—in disguise. I have been with you constantly on this trip, but you were too concentrated to recognize me. And now this puts you entirely in my hands, I believe. I could have you arrested, disgraced, confined. Or I could pass you through, just as I happen to please."

MIND you, this dream-conversation is repeated here to the best of my ability, but I do not wish to vouch for its entire accuracy. The next utterance, however, is an exact quotation which I have verified from the records of the district attorney. It is sufficiently startling, I think, to warrant emphasis here.

For the duck added:

"And so this turns the tables, doesn't it, my long-nosed little pedagogue? Isn't it just ducky?"

And I heard or felt an answer to this in my own (the author's) voice, heavy with irony and resentment:

"Yes. Oh, yes. Very ducky. Quite ducky. But a dangerous game, Ducky."

Then somehow the scene shifted suddenly. I was in a garden. The pink duck was with me, escorting me down a flowery path and presenting me to scores of queer animal characters which were only distortions of humans. I resented these characters. I detested the duck. I was afraid of him. I loathed him. And I knew that he hated me too. Still, he was making a great show of me and constantly referring to me as "the great Doctor Brain." But somehow I knew that I had the means of evening the score with this obnoxious duck. Secretly I enjoyed that consciousness. Secretly I tolerated his bombastic manner of hawking me to the audience of animals like a circus barker, knowing that some fine day I would punish him for it.

And then it was over: the record had run out. I awoke in a vile sweat like a man emerging from a hateful nightmare. Bab was staring at me in alarm, and so was Charley Oster.

"Major! *Major!* Are you all right? You look pale. Did you get a shock? Isn't it wonderful?" Bab demanded.

BAB was attending one of those institutions called "tutorial schools" in an effort to adjust her hit-or-miss schooling gathered in European *lycées* and gymnasia to the more practical but less spectacular American curriculum. She came home for luncheon, bringing a newspaper in which I discovered the next element in this extraordinary drama.

She had gone out again when I read the paper. On an inside page commonly devoted to news of the world of art and scholarship, I found a headline which compelled me to read the article which followed it. I quote:

POSTHUMOUS HONORS FOR DR. FITZJAMES AS PSYCHIATRIC GROUP PUBLISHES MEMOIRS OF LATE N. J. PROFESSOR IN OMNIBUS EDITION

LED THE WORLD IN BRAIN-RESEARCH
CALLED GENIUS OF OUR TIMES

* *

The National Board of Psychiatric Research today releases a volume which may become the Bible of psychology students throughout the scientific world. This volume, in which is incorporated revolutionary theories concerning the functions of the human brain, is a compilation of class-notes, memoranda and personal memoirs of the late Dr. Maurice Fitzjames, former distinguished professor of physiological psychology at the N. J. State College of Science. Already hailed by students of the subject everywhere, this work is said to open new vistas of knowledge in this most obscure of sciences concerning, "How and why we think."

The great American psychologist, at the time of his sudden death last December, was the center of considerable contention. A great deal of fantasy and legend fastened itself to his name.

"When I called him Ducky, he let out a crazy yell and jumped at me."

In conjunction with his work of amplifying and examining the electrical impulses of the human brain, it was claimed for Dr. Fitzjames, although emphatically denied by him, that he may have perfected an instrument for penetrating into the mind of others, and reading or recording their inmost thoughts. One rumor went so far as to assert that the distinguished professor had already made use of such a machine in his classroom and had made a library of records in which the very essence of his students' minds was stored and registered. Further fantastic claims supposed that Dr. Fitzjames' "brain machine" might some day augment the already well-known "lie detector" for use in criminal prosecutions.

The present volume, ably and faithfully edited by Prof. Addington Duckworth, who supersedes Dr. Fitzjames to the chair of psychology at N. J. S. C. S., puts an end to all such fantasies. It reveals that while the late brain student did actually experiment with brain-electricity—a new science in which many other moderns have also dabbled—he strenuously resented all such fantastic implications as popular legend would foist upon him.

Between the lines of this posthumous work, also, it seems that the editor, Prof. Duckworth, who has long been associated with Dr. Fitzjames, may have been something more than an invaluable aid in the pursuance of new discoveries. In the preface to the book, however, Professor Duckworth modestly disclaims any part in the founding of Fitzjames' new science.

And there was considerably more which, for the sake of reasonable brevity, I find it judicious to omit.

Naturally I was struck by the several facts which must also have struck the present reader of these lines. The words "brain machine," for instance, did not fail to suggest the junk-shop discovery of daughter Bab. The election, even posthumously, to the honorary presidency of a "Fellowship," did not fail to remind me that several of that cabinet full of records bore labels which began with the word *"Fellowship."* Moreover, I had "listened" to these records, and while I do not pretend to possess any knowledge of the scientific terminology of psychiatry, I could not miss recognizing them as being thought-memoranda stored away for the purpose of writing some sort of scientific paper—perhaps a monograph concerning the functions of the human brain.

Then this name *Duckworth!*

"It takes a hell of a lot of coincidences," once remarked a friend of mine who is in the Government secret service, "to make a fact. But if you get enough of them, you can grab a fact by the tail."

And with the name of *Addington Duckworth,* I was quite sure I had a plethora of coincidences.

A *pink duck.* The word *"ducky."* Professor Addington *Duck*worth. Examine those three together, if you will.

For all through those records ran the word *ducky* or the symbolic figure of a disagreeable duck. Sometimes the word was used as a proper name. There was some person in the life of the author (recorder) called "Ducky." And especially in that record entitled *"Memo. Will. Mack. Must, etc."* it appeared that the author had recorded a brain-record for himself by which to remind himself that he must exclude some person called "Ducky" from his will, save only that "Ducky" would, at the death of the author, inherit something called "fluxes," and that one of these "fluxes," too, would be withheld. . . .

Now, do not suppose for a moment that my daughter Bab had failed to read that newspaper article. In fact, when she came home that evening, she came bluntly to the point.

"Did you read it, Major?"

I knew what she meant. We have a certain kind of spiritual understanding, my daughter and I.

"Do you think it could be—" I understood the ending of her query too.

I nodded. "It could be, Bab. Of course it's pretty fantastic, but I think it could be. If it is—well, of course you must give up your toy, and we'll return it to the N. J. State College of Science, or whoever ought to get it. I'm going to write a letter to this Professor Duckworth. If he replies at all, we will know that you have stumbled upon something—something even wilder than your own flights of fancy."

And write I did.

THE answer came in three days. And it came in a form which surprised us all. It assumed the form of a personal visit from Professor Duckworth himself.

My colored housekeeper, Hannah, routed me out of my studio that afternoon.

"They's a gem'mun askin' fo' you, Mistah Major Oswald, sir. He's a right han'sum gen'mun, too. He's the mos' quality folks what we seen sence we been in this here place."

Professor Duckworth it was.

May I say that he was not what I had expected. Far short of looking like a professor of anything at all, much less of psychology, he was a mere boy—or such was the first impression. Actually, I suppose, Duckworth was in his thirties; yet his face was as smooth as though he had never shaved, and his cheeks glowed with healthy (or cardiac?) color. He was, quite as Hannah had observed, both handsome and distinguished-looking.

"Mr. Oswald? Or should I say Major Oswald?" was his overdone greeting. "But of course you are. I should have known you in a thousand, as who would not? Painter, explorer, globe-trotter, and possessor of such an extraordinary record for valor in the last war! Believe me, sir, I was not only surprised by the contents of your letter but overwhelmed by the mere fact of it. How do you do, sir? I'm Duckworth."

Rather a speech, that. I detest persons who dig up my so-called heroism of the war days—one of those things which happen to men quite by chance and due to no real heroism at all; and I equally detest persons who endeavor to lionize me merely because I happen to paint. Are artists intended for zoos or glass cages?

I took the man's hand nevertheless, mentioning that I had not expected a personal visit as the result of my letter, and he informed me that since College Plains, N.J., is quite near to my suburban town of Coldridge, he had thought nothing of driving out rather than writing a reply. . . .

One thing I must mention before I go on. That is the man's eyes, and the remarkable fact of his resemblance to a duck. They were bad eyes, greedy eyes. They were, in short, the very same eyes which I had "seen" or felt when I played that dream-record on this extraordinary recording machine. Yes, he did resemble a duck—a very handsome duck, no doubt, but a duck nevertheless. The lips were thin and slightly protruding, and he had a manner of opening them flatly, bill-like, as he spoke that set me to listening for a *quack-quack* instead of speech.

We finally got down to cases. We discussed Bab's junk-found instrument and its oddities. And Professor Duckworth surprised me once more by disclaiming any possible association of the thing with his late lamented colleague Dr. Fitzjames.

"I should dislike it very much," he said, "if the press should get hold of this thing and add to the unfortunate legends that have insinuated themselves around poor Fitzjames' name. Whatever he may have been, there was nothing of the charlatan or prestidigitator about Maurice Fitzjames."

I pointed out to him that he seemed to be extraordinarily positive, especially as I had not as yet even shown him the instrument. I added that a man who interested himself in sciences as remote as the electric energy emitted by the brain might even dabble in things as incredible as devices to probe the inner thoughts and to record them.

"Dabble?" He resented the word. "Fitzjames did not dabble. He sought the true functions of the brain and their physiological and mechanical operation. He sought after truth! That he did experiment with the brain's electricity is true, but so have many other entirely serious men. As to thinking-machines—"

He shrugged. His shoulders said clearly: "Perish the thought!"

But the thought would not quite perish in me. Under a cloth on a table in my living-room I had a machine which could be described by no other phrase than that—a "thinking-machine." Possibly it was not the creation of Fitzjames. But if not, how explain that series of coincidences?

I HAD delayed an actual exhibition of my daughter's junk-shop toy until she herself should arrive and be a party to it. After all, the affair was more her concern than mine; and if she should by some means lose that machine, I knew it would just about break her excited little heart. For her, this machine was the eighth wonder of an ultra-modern world.

Bab came in shortly, however, and was duly presented to Duckworth. That child of mine sometimes has a devil in her; and she astonished and pleased this youthful professor with her uncanny memories, her glib, quick repartee, her amazing command of a half-dozen languages, her straight-to-the-point observations and her revelation that she, too, without taking the pains to inform me, had not only gone to the library and found a book written by Professor Duckworth himself, but had assimilated a considerable part of this profound document.

The little scamp behaved, in short, to such effect that she succeeded in bewildering our visitor and charming him entirely. And of course it was Bab herself who demonstrated the "brain-machine."

Believe me, it was a nervous and tense half-hour for me. I had already made up my mind—for no good reason at all save that I *wanted* it that way—that this was an undiscovered invention of the great Maurice Fitzjames, and that Addington Duckworth was the inimical "Ducky" and the Pink Duck of those grotesque dream-records.

But he denied it flatly.

"No," he said, and I fancied it was with considerable relief, "now that I've gone through all this, I am only the more convinced that this—this—whatever it really is—can be nothing at all associated with Maurice. Nothing! Naturally, I have heard all his most intimate theories several times—we were closely associated for nearly a dozen years, Major Oswald; and I can assure you that even his most revolutionary theses never reached as far from the—ah—normal as the mental notes of this—this fellow who made these records. My guess is that he was unbalanced. Very probably sane enough, but warped. Fixations—hallucinations—instability. And yet of course entirely wonderful in his way. Wonderful, really. Do you realize, sir, what it is that this unknown has given to the world in this machine? An apparatus for recording the unspoken thoughts of the human mind. It is—ah—gigantic. It is the attainment of an epoch. Now that it has been found, it will—ah—revolutionize our laboratory work. It will bring the science of psychology into its own truly practical and demonstrable field. Really, Major Oswald, I have never been so moved. I must have this machine. In the name of the Fellowship, in that of the Psychiatric Board, I offer to buy it."

"Oh, no!" There was childish agony in Bab's cry. "Oh, no, we wouldn't sell it! It's mine, isn't it, Major?"

The first interview with Professor Duckworth ended on that note.

WE saw more of Addington Duckworth, however. He was tenacious, whatever else. And also he appeared to have taken an almighty and perhaps professional interest in my daughter's oddly developed mind.

"She follows no pattern that we recognize," he stated to me. "She is not precocious in the unfortunate sense. She is rather a creature whose mind has expanded and developed normally along channels which are, to say the least, unconventional. In many ways her intelligence is superior to that of many of my students almost twice her age. Believe me, Major Oswald, it is a privilege for a man of my—ah—interests and studies to have contact with such a girl. And with yourself too, sir. You will not refuse me permission to visit you now and then?"

No, I could not refuse him. Nor could I like the man. . . .

It was the day after his first visit, that Bab told me an odd thing.

"I sort of played tricks on Professor Duckworth, didn't I?" she commenced.

"Tricks?" I repeated.

"Yes. I rearranged all the records in the box; and all he ever saw—or heard—were the Fellowship and the

Memo records. I didn't want to give him the rest because—well, because—"

Now why, I wondered, had she done that? I saw no good reason. And also I wondered how it was that Duckworth could be so absolutely certain about Fitzjames and that brain-machine when he had only "heard" a portion of the records?

When Duckworth came again, he made a rather unusual offer to buy the machine—always in the name of the N. J. State College of Science, of course. He offered one thousand dollars in cash, and he offered to replace its "toy value" to Bab by making her a present of a complete amateur radio station which had once been utilized by the college laboratory. It was a handsome present to contemplate. Such an equipment might run into considerable money. All told, his offer amounted to some three thousand dollars in potential value. And Bab had paid a five-dollar bill for the thing!

But Bab refused his offer. True, she had just passed her amateur license examination and was now a full-fledged operator entitled to communicate with "hams" all over the country to the extent of the power of her own transmitter. But she told me that she and Charley Oster would build a station, and she didn't want to part with the "brain-machine" for any money at all.

However, she did profit by Duckworth's constant visiting. Once I let her drive down to College Plains with him and visit his classes. Apparently she enjoyed herself, and just as apparently she liked the young professor.

"They do wonderful things in his classes, Major," she reported. "They can tell different diseases of people by looking at a chart of the electric brain-waves that people send out. They have all kinds of wonderful electric gadgets to do things with. They even try to find the atoms of the brain-stuff by whirling bits of the brain in machines and looking at them under ultramicroscopes which are like television machines. Oh, I'd like to go to school there, Major. I'd love to be in Professor Duckworth's classes!"

Ridiculous, incredible imp! I told her that it was far more important for her to find her own level in American high schools like any normal child than to unbalance herself further by taking on more "advanced" interests to the loss of the elementals.

But Professor Duckworth persevered. He visited us often. He brought the girl presents—a puppy, a rabbit from the college laboratories, books, periodicals and a myriad of things of incongruous pattern. Plainly a good psychologist, he did not make the mistake of "talking down" to her, but treated her as his equal in age and intelligence. This was subtle flattery and a sure way to the girl's heart and confidence.

"That record is practically a confession of murder," said Bab.

AS a father—and because I instinctively disliked the man, perhaps—I was not very pleased with the Professor's campaign. It even occurred to me that there might be more to this than met the eye. After all, Bab is a very attractive young lady in her own right, and it is not an unheard-of thing for a man of thirty to be drawn toward a lass half his age. However, he also contrived to lull my fears by insisting that his purpose was to study what he called "the most remarkable case of free mental development" that had ever come to his attention. He assured me that he was making every effort to bring my daughter around to the usual interests of young women her age, by dint of letting her compare herself with other girls in his classes.

Nevertheless, trouble came of it.

The N. J. State College of Science held a Junior Prom. Duckworth came to me with a proposal to take Bab to the function.

I flatly refused at first, but when he pointed out that most American girls actually "live" for their first prom, and that since he had to be there in an official capacity, and that despite her junior years she was quite able to attract other young men of the college

and might easily make entirely usual friendships which would tend to bring her back into the conventional pattern of girls her age, I finally consented.

I had not expected Bab to return before early morning hours, knowing about proms from my own college days; but she returned to surprise me before midnight. Also she returned alone and without her professorial cavalier. She was pale and nervous.

"Oh, Daddy, Daddy!" She had plainly been frightened half to death. "Oh, Daddy, he hit me! He struck me! He—he was a beast! He's insane, I think."

"Struck you! Who—Duckworth?"

She nodded. She showed me a rather bad bruise upon her face which might have been made by a fist. And of course I was ready to do murder. I saw red. I would pull that duck-billed platypus apart with my hands! So that was it, after all!

But that was not quite the trouble.

SHE told me she had gone up to Duckworth's study to look at some of his books. He was, it seems, a collector of early printed matter, specializing in Voltaire and the Bolandists, about which my precocious lass knew a great deal. He had left her alone for a few minutes and had gone to another room of his apartment for some reason; and she, true to her traits of unlimited curiosity, had gone browsing through his bookcases.

"And that was how I found it, Major—a little phonograph record tucked away between two big books. It was just exactly like the records we have here with—with that machine, only—only the label was written in another handwriting. It was in his own handwriting! Imagine it!"

I couldn't quite. For a moment the whirlwind of implications in this discovery staggered me. Was it possible that this man had known about those other records all along? That he was only pretending that he had never heard of such a device before? Why?

"So I pulled it out, and I was looking at it. Honestly, Daddy, you just couldn't miss it—it was a record from the same batch. Even the paper of the label was torn from the same pad, and all that. I was so surprised that I called out to him: *'Ducky!* Come here!' I don't know just why I said *Ducky*. I guess I've always thought of him as Ducky in my mind. He is a Ducky, so I called him Ducky, without thinking. Well, I didn't know he was right there at the door all the time. I guess he had see me snooping around and pulling out that record. Anyhow, when I called him, he was wildly angry. Major! Mad—crazy, gaga! He had a glass of water in his hand, and he dropped it and jumped at me."

"Jumped at you?"

"Yes, he did. He just let out a crazy choking sort of yell, and jumped at me. I was scared stiff. I ducked away, but he managed to swing his fist so as it hit me on the side of the face. Daddy, for a minute I thought that man would *murder* me. Murder! He had it in his eyes. He had it in the way his face was working, and the way his hands were clutching. I got around a big table from him, and he didn't catch me. I yelled. I yelled my head off. And then all of a sudden he stopped. He changed. He grabbed the table and toppled against it as though he were sick or something. Then he collapsed into a chair and held his head in his hands and cried—yes, he did: he cried. He cried, and he said things meant to be an apology. I don't know what he said, really, but he was trying to explain himself. Anyhow, what I got was that he couldn't stand being called Ducky. Can you imagine it? And of course I didn't stay to hear it, I just ran out of the place and got a taxicab and came all the way home in it."

Well, there it was. Can you make anything out of it? I could not, I assure you. Had the man plunged himself into this incredible paroxysm of rage to the point where he would strike a fifteen-year-old girl just because she had found this concealed record? Or because she had called him Ducky? Frankly, my own fury abated before the onrush of curiosity. It was a puzzle, no matter which way one might prefer to look at it. But I was quickly to get a partial answer. For my front door bell began to ring sharply. Hannah was out for the evening, and I replied in person.

IT was Duckworth. He looked—ill; crushed, pale. He spoke in a subdued, tense voice, looking at me, trembling a little, saying:

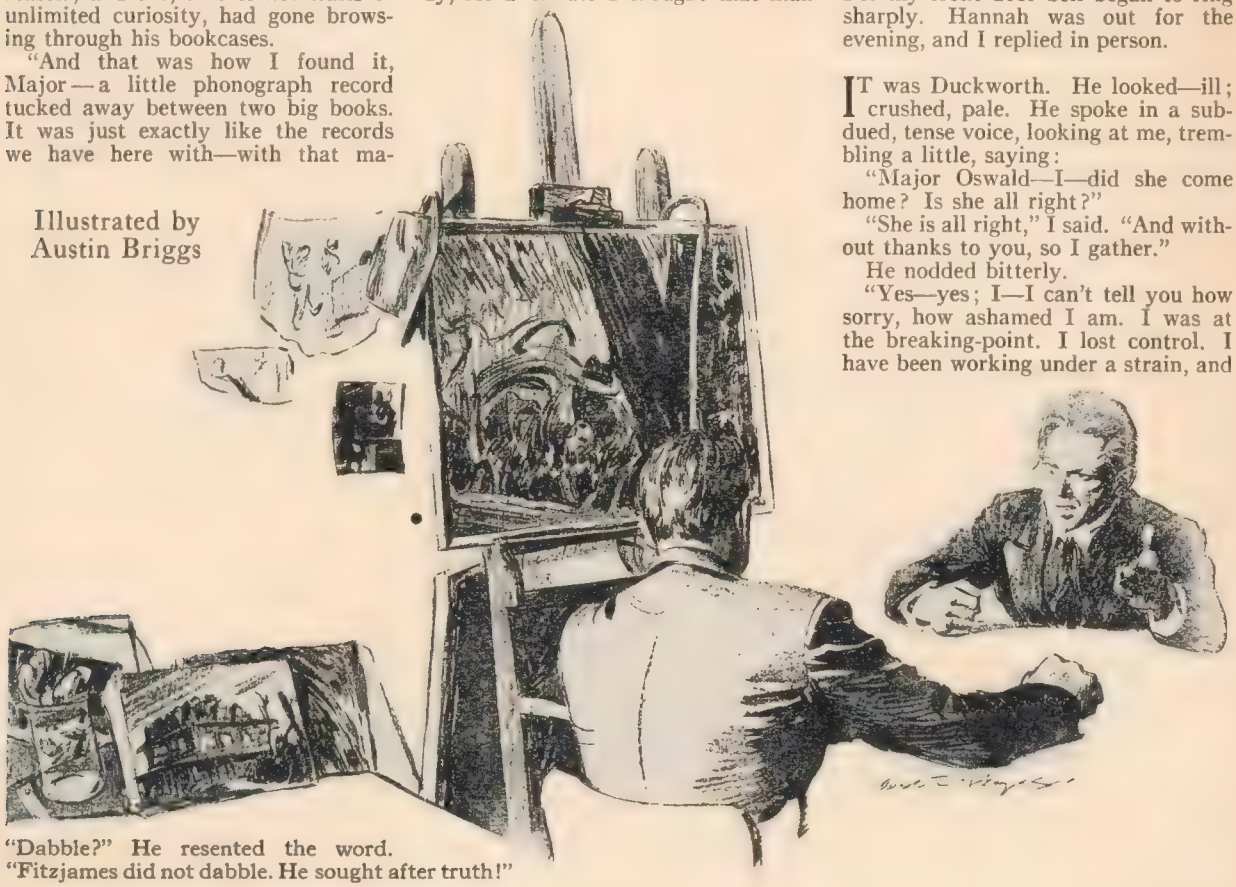
"Major Oswald—I—did she come home? Is she all right?"

"She is all right," I said. "And without thanks to you, so I gather."

He nodded bitterly.

"Yes—yes; I—I can't tell you how sorry, how ashamed I am. I was at the breaking-point. I lost control. I have been working under a strain, and

Illustrated by Austin Briggs



"Dabble?" He resented the word. "Fitzjames did not dabble. He sought after truth!"

I fear my mind has been—shaken out of its balance. And when the child used that name—"

"Ducky?" He nodded again. He also winced. He said hoarsely:

"Yes. Even when I am not under a strain, when I am myself, that name infuriates me. It is a fixation which traces back to my boyhood. I was an unpopular boy in school. No boy with a name like Addington Duckworth can escape persecution unless he is physically strong, and I was not. Boys in school made me miserable. I was Ducky—Ducky, Ducky, Ducky! And God help me, I *looked* like a duck. I know. No one can understand the horror of self-torment, of self-pity. I was the ugly duckling. I was a monstrosity. The name and the unfortunate resemblance to the duck was fodder to the impish minds of all my boyhood. I was a supersensitive, hyperthyroid type—I still am, unfortunately. Each time I was teased and called 'Ducky-lucky,' or made the victim of other silly but grotesque puns on my name, I died a thousand deaths of sheer mortification.

"Believe me, Major, I have struggled hard against this hateful—and entirely silly—fixation. I even went so far as to subject my face to plastic surgery. Only the greatest skill in America has made me what I am—a passably good-looking sort of man. I overdress; I have become stupidly meticulous about my appearance. All this is a reaction to that awful persecution of my youth. And now I must even confess to you that my first interest in psychology is the result of my effort to uproot this complex from my own nature. I was a thoughtful boy, terribly aware of my own warped nature. I tried everything to help me overcome the distortion. And tonight when that lovely child of yours called me—that name, I—I lost control. Frankly, sir, I was insane. I have come to ask your pardon as her father. Your pardon and hers. I am ashamed. Inconceivably ashamed, Major Oswald. And I cannot tell you of the mortification, the humiliation which the memory of that scene of this evening brings to me. Please, sir, I ask you—to understand a little."

I am, I fancy, quite as human as another. I disliked this man—but could not hide from myself the tragedy which this unbelievable story of his contained. I believed him. I myself knew something of the cruelty of young boys to each other, and also of the terrible pain of taunted youth. And I could not but admire the inherent courage of a man who could thus come boldly to humiliate himself before a child of fifteen.

THEREFORE I called my daughter, and he repeated, substantially, his confession, making an abject apology.

But when he had gone, Bab turned to me with that impish look that sometimes comes into her face.

"What a pity, Major—I mean what a pity that Duckworth became a professor instead of going into the theater."

Then, seeing me properly scandalized, she went off to her room and locked the door behind her.

NEXT morning the motive of her remark came out. She had, it seems, stolen that record which she had found in Duckworth's library, and she had brought it home concealed in her handbag. When she told me of this ill-flavored deed, I was annoyed with her; but when I learned that, unknown to me, she had taken that damnable brain-machine into her room and had spent half the night "listening" to the record, my annoyance became complicated with curiosity.

"Daddy," she said in her direct and terribly serious way, "that man is a murderer. He killed Dr. Fitzjames. I know he did. That record is practically a confession of murder."

Naturally, I "played" the record. Let me say before revealing its contents that there was no doubt in my mind that this small five-inch disk had been one of an original set of forty-two purchased by someone, and bearing crude labels pasted on by the same person and at the same time as the other labels. The fact that an odd number, forty-one records, had been contained in that original case, had already struck me. For the case had forty-two grooves or slots for holding the records, one of them always having been empty. Mind you, all this pseudo-deduction could have meant absolutely nothing, but there it was in my head and I could not shake it out.

Now as to the "contents" of this little record. I have already reported that the label was torn from a blue-ruled pad, like the others, and that it differed from them only in the handwriting. Bab had said that the writing was Duckworth's. I took her word for it. But certainly the "thinking" was not the same as the other set of records.

As the thing turned on its table and the head-contacts were clamped to my hair, I became conscious of being, for that moment, another entity, another person—but not the same person I had "been" when I "played" those other records in my first curiosity, and joined my daughter in the discovery of what may have been the most extraordinary device ever contrived by man.

Yet there was a similarity. There was both *hate* and *fear* in both characters. Only in this thought-record the hate was more virulent, more powerful, more purposeful. As I allowed this evil thing to filter into my brain, I became conscious of the intent to kill. There was, just as Bab had implied, murder in this record—cold, calculated murder.

It was thought, not a dream. There was no distorted animal-like figure, no duck, no grotesque caricature. There was the image of a man. *I hated that man,* as I "played" the record. The man was in his fifties, I should say. He was not large. He was not powerful nor yet vicious-seeming. But the image of him was remarkable for a nose of extraordinary length. Somehow I delighted in that nose. Somehow that unlovely feature gave me relish, if not real joy. I was aware, somehow, that this man was sensitive about his nose, that he hated it, and suffered from it. I was glad—for I wanted him to suffer. Somehow I knew that he had made me suffer inconceivable anguish, had injured me beyond any possible reparation, and his suffering was as a balm to my own.

But my diabolical hatred did not stop there. Something (I was not able then to determine just what this thing was) had happened to crystallize this hatred of mine into vengeance. There was a sense of privation, of loss, of having been cheated and outwitted by this long-nosed man, which was as though some fiber of my very soul had been stolen from me, and I would not let this hellish thing go unpunished.

And in this mechanical mind of mine, which was only wax on cardboard after all, and whose function was only electrical, I felt myself plotting and devising—murder. I was going to kill this hateful man. This mind of mine contained vast stores of information upon which I drew. I contemplated poisons whose very names and effects were unknown to the "me" who was Albert Oswald, and yet which were crystal clear to the recorded "me" who was—whoever it was. I contemplated violence. I planned and replanned and abandoned plans, some of them sheer masterpieces of diabolical treachery. I saw myself with my hands gripping this man's throat; I heard in my waxen imagination his dying gasps, saw his face purple, saw that nose go white, knew myself to be gloating.

And then the thing stopped. It was over. I had done nothing. I had only contemplated—murder.

BELIEVE me when I say that I was a man overcome by opposed and confused emotions when I had run that record out. The effect of the experience upon me was horrible. I felt that I had lived an instant of evil. I felt a kind of inward loathing of my own self. I craved air. I needed a purge from the loathsome effect of spiritual poison. And through the fog of this reaction I heard Bab's voice:

"Daddy—Daddy—Major—isn't it awful? What shall we do? He killed

"Major Oswald—I—did she come home? Is she all right?"

Dr. Fitzjames, didn't he? I know he did. He's a murderer. I saw that in his face last night."

And I could not answer her. I withdrew into the sanctuary of my studio.

Worse yet came later. Bab came to me in rare excitement, with a torn piece of yellowed newsprint in her hand.

"Look, Major—I found this in the library. I went there and looked up the newspaper reports of Dr. Fitzjames' death. He died suddenly. He died of heart-failure. There are lots of poisons that can give symptoms of heart-failure. I know, because I've read about them. That awful Duckworth did poison him, I'm sure. Because look—I tore this picture out of the paper. I had to. I had to show it to you. It's a picture of Dr. Fitzjames—see? It—it's just like—like that awful record."

She thrust the thing at me. I could not refuse to look at it, although the entire thing induced repugnance in me.

And the face of the eminent Dr. Maurice Fitzjames was none other than that misty half-remembered face which, during the turning of that ghastly thought-record, I had visualized in that waxen electric mind. The nose was—exotic. No Cyrano de Bergerac had ever boasted such a nose. It was tremendous, gigantic, spectacular—horrible.

"Good God!" was all I was able to say. "Good God, child! Take that thing away and burn it. This does not concern us. We must forget that this ever happened. I want you to destroy that damnable box and those records. I want us to be free of all of it. That thing from the junk-shop has brought a spiritual stench into this house. Get rid of it. I mean that, Bab. I want that thing taken away."

The child looked at me in consternation and bewilderment. Then without a word she turned and left the room.

That same day I received a letter from the Dean of the Faculty of the N. J. College of Science, offering three thousand dollars for the purchase of "the device whose extraordinary existence and purpose Professor Duckworth has revealed and explained." That same day also Hannah summoned me to the telephone, proclaiming that Professor Duckworth wanted to talk with me. I refused the call. I was "out." And when, at the close of the day, we sat down to dinner, I am sure that I noticed what seemed to be a very odd sort of manner in my small daughter.

SHE had not spoken to me since morning, when I'd issued my ultimatum. She had been not at all mature about my decision to get rid of that brain-machine, but had been childishly hurt. I knew her. I knew that she had made up her mind somehow and in some fantastic way that only young girls can attain, that I had betrayed her. Previously I had been "on her side," refusing to sell the thing or let Duckworth have it. Now I had shifted and was "against her." Don't look for logic in this position—merely accept it as fact. That is what I did.

I said her behavior at dinner was odd. She ate almost nothing. She was restless. Although she maintained her hurt silence and affected a tremendous scorn and dignity toward a mere father who had ventured to cross her purposes, I noticed that she observed me often out of the corners of her eyes. And I also noticed that she watched the clock, and that she seemed on the alert or listening, as though for the door bell. Had she, the little fool, I wondered, got in touch with Duckworth again? She was entirely capable of it.

But it was not that. It was not Addington Duckworth who came to our front door in the middle of my dinner hour. It was an officer from the District Attorney, presumably a detective, although I know not the ratings and statuses of such persons. He could not be described as a cultivated gentleman, albeit not lacking a certain wit.

"Huh? So you're Major Albert Oswald, hey? Heard about you, sometimes. I'm Finnegan, from the D. A.'s office. You got a kid daughter?"

I admitted fatherhood.

"Is she nuts?" He hesitated; then: "I mean, is she okay—in the head? She aint cuckoo? Say, you aint had no trouble with her?"

From inside, behind a closed door, I heard what I could have sworn was a giggle.

"My daughter," I said, "has been considered a rather unusual child, but I can assure you that she suffers from no mental trouble. But why? What is your concern about her? Why are you here?"

He pushed into the small lobby and looked at me with a certain air that was unmistakably pity.

" 'Tis what she's been givin' the Distric' Attorney," he said. "Listen, Oswald, you look like a good feller, even if you are an artist. Me, I don't go fer artists and the like myself, but you have yer D.S.O. from the war, and I was in the Sixty-ninth myself. So I don't like to bring trouble to yer house, see? But when a mite of a girl crashes the D. A.'s office with a yarn about her bein' a witness to a murder, it's bad business, see? And then when she spins another yarn about some cockeyed brain-machine which has got the murderer's confession canned on a phonygraph record—*before* he killed somebody, mind you—then by God, Mister, you've got a little girl which is a liability. There is psychiatrists which can examine the heads of such. And anyhow, the D. A. sends me after the both of you, which is why I'm here. So get yer hat and the girl, and come along quiet and decent."

And while I was still gasping, he added:

"But tell me now, Oswald, between the two of us, did you know of a murder; and if so, who was it killed which, and when? We aint got no murder on the books. Or is it maybe you are nutty too?"

For a moment I was inclined to consider this possibility seriously.

Morton Coombs was District Attorney, a man distinguished both for his restraint and his capable manner of handling the thousands of cases which come over his desk annually. Before the evening was over, I found myself glad that this incredible business had been brought to the attention of so able a man.

Mind you, all during that taxi ride to the county seat, my daughter did not utter a single word, either voluntarily or in reply to my questions or the officer's. Just what, I wondered, had she said? What fantastic story could she have reported?

Mr. Coombs was considerate, but one could see that he was not a man easily swayed from any fixed purpose.

"Let me make your position clear, Major Oswald: Had the story concerned any crime other than murder, I should have taken different measures. As it is, I feel it my duty to confront the father with the story told by his daughter, and to get a hearing of such concrete facts, if any, as may be involved. You understand the seriousness of any such charge, so please try to help us rather than to shield your daughter uselessly. She came here and rather forced her way to me by stating glibly to my assistants that she knew of a murder. To me she told a tale of —well, here is a stenographic report of it, taken over a wire from a concealed microphone. That is a practice of mine which I find useful. Read it. I prefer to let you read her own words."

Naturally, I surmised what I would read, and my surmise proved more or less accurate. She had told of the discovery of the brain-machine in a junk-shop. She named the shop. She described the machine in detail. She told of the forty-one records. She referred to my letter resulting from the newspaper article. She mentioned Duckworth and his visit, but she did not disclose his name. She did not mention the unpleasant scene in the professor's study, but she told of having taken the concealed record, and she stated baldly that the record proved to be a recording of that man's mind in the premeditation of murder. Then followed what to me was a surprise:

"The reason I'm so certain about all this," she was reported to have said, "is that the record I found in that man's bookcase was dated November 29, and the man I think he killed was found dead of heart-failure on December 2. Now, I want you to make my father come down here and talk to him. He doesn't know I'm here, but he knows all about those records, and he wants me to get rid of that machine; and I just know that is not the right way to do this. A murder is still a murder, isn't it, even if it happened nearly a year ago?"

I had not thought to look up the date of Maurice Fitzjames' death, and this revelation shocked me deeply. Was it possible that my overimaginative little girl was correct in her deductions?

Naturally, I told the entire story again to Mr. Coombs.

"I don't ask you merely to believe my statement, sir," I told him. "That damnable machine is still in my house. You may inspect it, test it, do with it what you wish."

He shook his head. "The very concept of such a machine impels one to doubts—doubt of his own senses or of anyone who might describe it."

"I can assure you, sir—" I fear I bristled a little.

The District Attorney smiled.

"No, no, don't misunderstand me. I do not doubt your word, nor the existence of the machine. On the contrary, I am quite convinced of it. Also I am entirely aware of the person whose murder your daughter suspects, even though she has carefully avoided mention of his name. Such a machine, if it exists, can only be the invention of Dr. Maurice Fitzjames, late of the N. J. State College of Science. Furthermore, the suspected murderer can only be the young professor who has taken his place—Addington Duckworth. We are not quite inactive in this office, Major. I may admit to you also that there has always been some small doubt concerning the heart-failure of the late psychologist—not a real suspicion of foul play, perhaps, but sufficient doubt so that I found it expedient to have an autopsy, although the fact was not made public at the time. Moreover, Dr. Fitzjames did actually die on December 2 of last year. The dates concerned leave no doubt as to the identity of the man in your daughter's mind."

And as I stared in consternation, he went on:

"Therefore," he said, "I have already sent for Professor Duckworth. He will be here at any moment now. One of my men has gone to your apartment to bring the machine in question. We shall be able to confront Duckworth with—the record and with the charge of premeditated murder."

It was a terror-stricken young Duckworth who appeared before the District Attorney that night. His face was haggard—his movements nervous, his eyes red from trouble and sleeplessness. I have never, I think, seen so much of suffering expressed in the face of a human being.

But when the entire case and charge was laid before him, he shook his head.

"No," he said in a low voice, and through thin, drawn ducklike lips, "I did not murder Maurice Fitzjames."

Then as though to complete a thought which had haunted him:

"But I wish to God I *had* killed him —killed him years ago."

You can imagine the effect of that.

"No human being can possibly understand what that man has done to me. God knows, I have meditated his murder. I had planned it not once but a hundred times. I had planned it at the last, just before he died. I would have poisoned him. I would have made him die a slow lingering death. I would have paid any price for the privilege. I would cheerfully have confessed to his murder. Miss Oswald has been quite right in her surmise—save only this one fact: I did not kill Fitzjames."

He paused. We sat in silence. What is the penalty by law for entertaining murder in one's heart, when one's hand is not actually lifted against a victim?

But Duckworth had a story to tell. It was a pathetic, incredible story. It was, all by itself, a complete study in the pathology of hate.

The story re-stated what Duckworth had already told me concerning his childhood of persecution, ugliness and self-consciousness. It added only that

among the greatest of his persecutors was the older boy, Maurice Fitzjames.

"Older than I, he was sharper-witted, equipped with a gift of distorted humor which could turn God Himself into ridicule. Believe me when I say that this very gift, in part, helped him to become one of the most popular teachers in this country. It gave him that touch of lightness which seems to be required by the younger generation. That, more than any science, gave him the foundation of his prestige."

A strange but vital twist to the case was also the deformed nose of Fitzjames, apparently.

"That ghastly nose of his, about which he was as sensitive as I was of my duckish face and the ridiculous association of my name, doubled the intensity of his venom. What he may have suffered himself, he was determined that I should suffer with interest. If I should tell you, gentlemen, the lengths to which his taunting of me was carried, you would not believe me. It was the result of an abnormal mind. It was inhuman—terrible."

THIS was bad, but the rest was worse. A physician who specialized in brain illnesses and nervous disease advised Duckworth to have his face altered by plastic surgery. He did. The result was so convincing both physically and mentally that it led the young man to pursue studies in psychology. He did so. He became distinguished in his college career, and followed this with further studies in Vienna. And it was in Europe that he again met his ancient nemesis, Maurice Fitzjames.

Both were grown men now; and at first what seemed to be a real friendship arose between the two. They studied together. They conversed; they exchanged their intimate theories and beliefs. And when in young Duckworth's mind was born the idea of translating the electric impulses of the brain into intelligible thought-forms and possibly discovering some means of reproducing them mechanically, in order that science could the better understand the workings of the human mind, it was Fitzjames who offered to finance the younger, poorer man's experiments.

Followed years of sleepless, interminable labor. Followed also success. Duckworth had found the key by which the "fluxes" of the brain might be translated electrically, and the thought-patterns stored in simple phonographic form. Duckworth, mind you, not Fitzjames.

But the older man proved a traitor. Armed with the knowledge acquired by this wonderful new access to the brain's mystery, Fitzjames wrote a monograph for the College of Science which presently brought him an offer to accept the chair in psychology. He took it. He left Vienna and returned to America. And with him he brought the only extant working model of Duckworth's wonderful machine.

It was a year before Duckworth discovered the whereabouts of his deceiver. He followed him. He accused him. To his face and in private, he accused him. Fitzjames revealed his true nature then. He laughed.

"You may accuse or not accuse. I am Fitzjames. You are an unheard-of dabbler. My position is such that no claim of yours to the machine or the invention would be believed. It is not patented. It was built with my money. In some measure of repayment, I will procure you a place as assistant in my department. In my will, on my death, I will allow you to inherit the thing. Otherwise, my remodeled duck, you can go hang. Sue if you like. All you'll get out of it is the laughter of the whole scientific world. If you claimed such a thing publicly, you would defeat your own purposes. Who would even believe that such a thing could exist? You would be looked upon as a charlatan. Anybody would. That is why I have utilized the experimental data given me by the machine, but I have never mentioned it. Its existence is not known. Now take your choice: come and work with me and help me to become even more of a figure than I already am—or else sue and get yourself laughed at—*Ducky!*"

It was hard to understand, I thought, and yet I could see the *impasse* into which Duckworth had fallen. Not a combative man at heart, he had accepted the humiliating alternative. One day, he thought, Fitzjames would die, and then he might claim his own right. And so he began a period of abject servitude to the celebrated psychiatrist.

"As time went on," he said, "the man's brain grew more and more warped. He returned to the youthful passion for making me cringe. He called me Ducky. He whispered—or made me think he did—to others about my still visible resemblance to a duck. I was powerless. I was a nobody. I could do nothing. I could only swallow it.

"Yes, gentlemen, I planned to kill Fitzjames. It became my obsession, my dream. my one hope for emancipation. That one record which Miss Oswald found in my study was one which I allowed myself to make in secret. Even I was amazed at the faithfulness with which it reproduced the torment in my own heart and mind. I lived in a divided world. My personality, as they say, was split. On the one hand, I was ashamed of this thing in my heart, while on the other I lived only for the day when I could see that inhuman man suffer and die. That record is a faithful reproduction of a continuous state of my mind. It is a cross-section of myself; it might have been made on any day during three horrible years.

"But although it was made on the twenty-ninth of November, just four days previous to Fitzjames' death, I still did not kill him. He died of heart-disease."

Then stiffening and squaring himself to the District Attorney:

"If there be a penalty, sir, let me have it now."

Mr. Coombs shook his head.

"There is none—in the law."

Then he added what might be called a spiritual ultimatum:

"Neither the law nor yet humanity has the right of punishment for a purely spiritual crime; and yet I feel it my duty to demand of you some symbolic sacrifice—a self-punishment, so to speak. My duty, because of its possible effect upon your own mind and—may I say—your soul. Will you accept a penalty?"

Duckworth said only one word:

"Yes."

"That machine of yours—that invention: I feel strongly that it may be an evil thing to read too well the mind of our fellow-humans. I urge you, therefore, to let that machine remain here in my office—permanently. Already it has served such purposes in behalf of science as it may. What good would come of claiming its existence either for yourself or for Fitzjames?"

"None—now," said the other. "I relinquish it."

IT was that night that Professor Addington Duckworth died—of heart-failure. There was no autopsy, though one newspaper writer clamored for one, claiming that in his opinion no disease of the heart could take such a young man at the sheer prime of his life without first giving some warning.

And yet there was no post-mortem.

Once, several days later, I ran across Mr. Morton Coombs on a commuters' train *en route* to New York. I admit that my curiosity led me into bad taste. For I asked him:

"Do you not find it almost ironical—shall we say extraordinarily remarkable—that poor Duckworth should have suffered a heart-attack on that very night?"

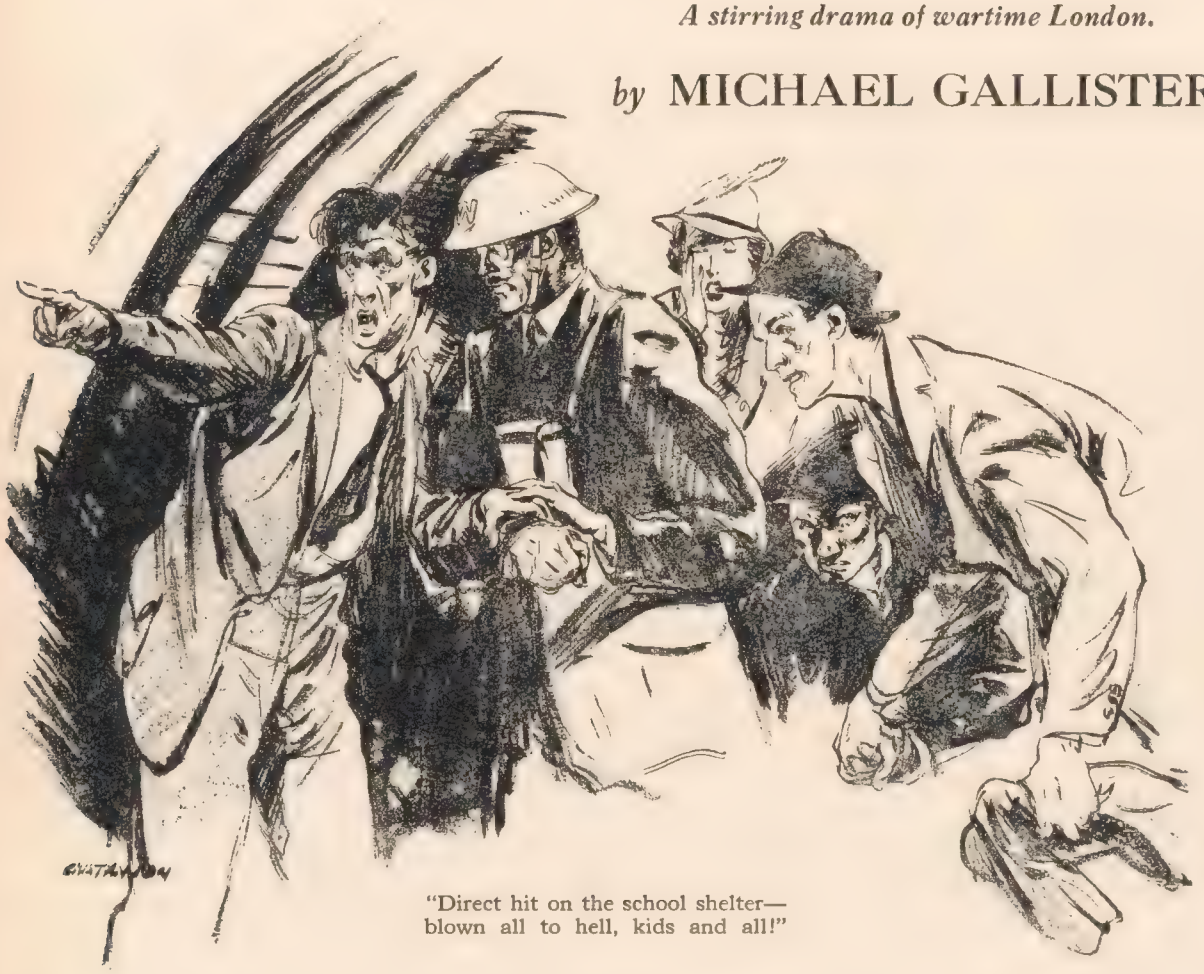
He answered with a look. That look I prefer not to translate.

A modern archery tournament and a mysterious arrow that flew the incredible distance of five hundred yards to consummate a strange murder—these are some of the unusual factors in another novelette by Fulton Grant which will appear in an early issue.

The Clock Strikes Seven

A stirring drama of wartime London.

by MICHAEL GALLISTER



"Direct hit on the school shelter—blown all to hell, kids and all!"

CREWE OF DUNKIRK! A newspaper had fastened that title on him, using him as an example of muddling, a savage bit of criticism in its leading article. And now, as he was making for the city, two men standing behind him in the crowded underground coach were talking about it.

"Crewe of Dunkirk?" The appellation caught horribly at his senses. "Yes, I heard about it. The chap made a mistake, that's all. Any seaman could understand it. He was a sailing chap in charge of a launch, which had a direct wheel—"

"Can't have that sort of mistake," said the other man, in the stiffly dictatorial English way. "Having too many such mistakes these days."

Crewe writhed in mental agony, as he left the underground and headed for his office.

He was a slender man, young, with a strongly pleasant face; during the past few months it had aged ten years, and the mouth was bitter as the eyes. A man with too much imagination for his own good. He had vainly tried to get into some branch of the service, but a splenectomy in youth barred him.

Now, striding along the streets of bomb-scarred London, he fancied that he could hear the whispers, the comment like a curse. That newspaper story had bitten deeply into him and he could not shake it off. It was indeed a curse. Crewe of Dunkirk! His imagination played with the accursed title now, as it had done a thousand times.

It all rose up before him now in the wan sunlight, as it had risen under the murky pall of Dunkirk: Seven wounded men, officers, important men, were clumped on the end of that ruined jetty, out beyond the burning destroyer. And he, in charge of and at the wheel of a rescue craft, a Thames launch, sent to take them off; he, the son of Lionel Crewe, V.C.; he, a yachtsman, used to the Channel, used to cruising up the coast, was at the wheel.

A petty officer, a grizzled salt from the *Diomede,* stood conning the approach and giving the orders, while the Hun planes swooped with guns ablaze.

Seven men were clumped on the end of that ruined jetty; and Crewe, at the wheel of a launch, was sent to take them off.

"Nicely, now! Nicely, Mr. Crewe! Ticklish bit of work here, sir. . . . Hard aport! Quick, now. . . . Hard aport—aport!"

And he, excited and ablaze in his own mind like the water and air around, forgetting the direct wheel of the launch, used to the indirect wheel of a sailing vessel, made the fatal error in that instant of supreme crisis. The wheel went hard over, the launch swept afar in the wrong direction. Before the error could be retrieved, the seven men on the jetty had died.

"And I wish to God I'd died too!" muttered Crewe of Dunkirk, coming at last into his own office and dropping heavily into a chair.

His eyes went up to his father's portrait on the office wall, across from the old clock. Lionel Crewe, V.C.—Crewe of Ypres. And he was branded Crewe of Dunkirk for the mistake he had made, he who had let seven men die. What ghastly contrast!

LIFE had become terrible these days, at least in Crewe's own mind. He made a pretense of business, although the air raids had practically ended business in the City. He could thank his stars that he was alone in the world; yet he was not alone. This was the frightful part of it all. Wherever he went, seven men followed—men whose death was due to his error.

He lit a cigarette and relaxed in his chair, trying to calm down. Hearing himself mentioned had put fever into his brain again.

"No doubt," he murmured ironically, "I should pray for some miracle of redemption, some chance to do a heroic deed and pass out doing it. That's the way it happens in the novels. But this, blast it, is real life!" He looked up again at the picture. "Good thing you won your V.C. and died before I came to life! Gad! You must be proud of your son!"

The eyes of the picture warmed and softened, as they had a way of doing.

It was one of those rare photographic studies that catch their sub-

ject between moods and bring out an odd wealth of expression, which varies according to the light. Crewe, who had always worshipped his father's memory, had since boyhood found curious things in this photograph. Sometimes it had left him with an eerie sense of the supernatural, as it smiled or frowned, approved or looked its scathing comment.

ONLY the eyes of childhood can see fairyland, however. Now, in his man's estate, he knew these fancies to be unreal. The tricks this photograph played were mere tricks of his own imagination.

The picture showed the head and shoulders only. It had been taken the day after Crewe of Ypres got his Victoria Cross, and he had been killed a fortnight later. He wore the look of a man who had just been given the greatest distinction valor can achieve, and there is no other look quite like it.

"I suppose," Crewe mused aloud, "that when one gets down to basic things, it doesn't actually matter at all whether or not I made a ghastly error. What does matter is that seven better men are dead because of my act. That's a debt I owe. So you agree, do you?"

The pictured eyes warmed again. The half-smile playing about the lips —which at times could become quite cold and harsh—deepened slightly. It had not made things easier for Crewe to pursue such imaginative games as this; it only seared the iron deeper into his heart and soul. Yet he pursued the game.

"I'll not carry the argument farther," he went on. "I might question whether those seven men aren't better off dead than alive, with the world what it is —but I'll not shirk the issue or cut corners. What the devil am I to do about it, sir? What's left for me? I don't particularly care what the world thinks; it's what you and I think that is important. How am I to rid myself of the weight of those seven dead men who follow me about night and day? Why don't you speak up and tell me, help me, give me some sort of a hint?"

As he looked, a tiny chill ran up his spine. It seemed that his challenge was being accepted; he fancied that those lips were moving, were about to speak. . . . Then he was jerked back to everyday reality by the buzzing of the telephone at his elbow. He picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" he said. A strange voice, a man's voice, made answer.

"Hello, old chap! Look here, why don't you pop into the underground and meet me in ten minutes? Get off at Liverpool Street. Walk east to the school, and I'll be there. Those shelters ought to be inspected, you know. They've been reported to be most unsafe."

"Sorry. Afraid you have the wrong number," said Crewe, and set down the receiver.

He puffed at his cigarette anew, lifting his eyes again to the photograph. Its oddly vital expression startled him. He even rose and left his chair in order to take a closer look. No, it was the same as ever. His confounded imagination was working again.

"Evidently I must be breaking up," he observed. "Seeing things mentally, as it were. Why, it wouldn't take much to make me think that was actually a reply to my question! Wonder what I'd find if I did take the tube to Liverpool Street? Obviously it was somebody inspecting shelters."

"Walk east to the school. I'll be there."

The words recurred to him clearly, like an echo. What school? He had no idea. He had not been in the Fenchurch vicinity for years. . . .

There is a stage of mental exhaustion and despair in which the brain, no matter how incredulous and alert it may normally be, will snatch at the most fantastic straws that offer some fancied prospects of relieving its own futility. Neither emotionally nor intellectually was Crewe given to any belief or indulgence in the supernatural; he had even left the church entirely alone because it made scant appeal to his rational ideals.

AS he walked down the stairs and sought the street, buttoning his overcoat against the chill, he did so despite himself, against his own solid judgment. He was conscious of a mental doubt and hesitation: What if this queer jumbled telephone call were actually to lead to something? He scoffed at the notion, yet the doubt remained, and he snatched at it and obeyed its prompting from the mere force of his own bitter despair.

As he gained the street, he heard the first distant siren warnings. He looked up. The sunny, early afternoon was now overcast; the devils were let loose. Well, what of it? The underground was as safe as anywhere, and he was in no search of safety.

He made for the underground. The sirens were now blaring across the whole sky, and shops and offices were emptying forth the nervous souls who had no hardihood to stick it out. This was the first daylight raid in a long time. Police and wardens were everywhere. Crewe blended with the crowd pouring into the underground, bought a ticket to Liverpool Street, and caught the first train that came through.

He had come to like crowds; they had, of late, become his one refuge, where he was unknown and unregarded, where he could forget himself and his self-consciousness, where Crewe of Dunkirk could disappear and be no more. When bad got to worse, he sometimes thought, he could shift into cap and old clothes and lose himself in the teeming multitudes across the river. Meantime, he held his head up and kept away from liquor—for a space.

The platforms were jammed everywhere. At his destination, he could hardly make his way to the street. A policeman on the stairs halted him briefly.

"Might be best to wait a bit, sir. The Docks are catching it again."

"I've not far to go," said Crewe, and passed on.

He regretted his confidence when he came out into the inferno that greeted him; for an instant he hesitated, appalled. The sky was crepitating white puffs everywhere; the barrage fire and the burst of shells created a sharply deafening uproar that tore at the nerves and drained one's vitality.

"Walk east to the school. I'll be there."

Turning to obey, Crewe smiled thinly. Who would be there? Nobody, now; whoever it had been, would now be in shelter. Unless, of course, it were the seven dead men who dogged him night and day. . . .

He walked on briskly; a block, and another. Now he became aware that there was a reiterant shake in the air, that the earth underfoot was quivering. *"Crump! Crump!"* The concussions came almost with regularity; it was like some invisible giant striding forward, each step a tremendous blasting explosion. From the direction of the Docks, southward, a vast black smoke-veil rent with frequent fiery flashes was ascending.

Crewe saw a helmeted warden running for him, waving an arm, beckoning. The devil! He had forgotten all about shrapnel; now it was beginning to fall everywhere, on roofs and street. The warden came to him, tugged at him, and Crewe yielded. Glass, what was left of it, was bulging out of windows and shattering, as the air-blast of the bombs tore it to flinders. To hear what the warden was shouting was impossible, but Crewe nodded and let himself be drawn out of the street and into one of the brick-and-sandbag shelters to which the public had taken a violent dislike. Lights flickered; he saw a few dozen people about him, and heard the warden's voice.

"No time to be abroad, sir. Catching it 'ot, we are."

"I was making for the school," said Crewe vaguely.

"Yes, sir; in the next block, sir. Thank God there'll not be many kids left there, but always too many—"

THE ground shook, dust eddied across the air from sandbags and bricks. A thin sound fought against the uproar; the crowd around was singing, defiantly, heartily. Crewe

Illustrated by
L. R. Gustavson

A tiny girl came, head-first. . . .
Then the next was in sight.

joined in, and was astonished by the immediate reaction; he gave laugh for laugh, grin for grin, found himself swept along by the spirit of those around him. He forgot, momentarily, what he most wanted to forget—himself. He was one with these people, and he rejoiced in it; when a grimy coal-man opened a parcel and pressed a sandwich upon him, he accepted with gusto. He had not eaten since breakfast, he now recollected.

In no time at all, he had his coat off and was on intimate terms with the coal-man, one Jem Arkwright, and with two costers who had been caught by the raid. They kept the singing going with a vim; all the while the air dinned with battle, and now and again the earth and the air shook to the concussion of exploding bombs, some close, some far.

When the two big ones struck close together, they all knew it. The shelter rocked; for an instant, the singing hushed. Then it continued with new force—until, suddenly, a man staggered in among them and clutched at the warden. Blood was on his face and horror in his eyes, and the voices stilled at sight of him.

"Telephone!" he cried out in a desperate voice. "Auxiliary ambulance. . . . Fire . . . telephone! Direct hit on the school shelter—blown all to hell, kids and all."

A woman screamed. The warden threw out his hands.

"Phone's dead, mate," he shouted in despair. "Services all off."

"Good God!" shrieked out the newcomer, nerve gone completely. "And them kids all buried under, and the next 'ouse afire!"

Crewe jerked up his hat and coat, and held out a hand to Arkwright.

"Come along, Jem! Come along, you lads—here's some costering worth while! You, warden—where are the tools kept? Show us, then get about sending in word. Try the underground shelter. . . . Who's with me, lads?"

Arkwright was up with a shout; half a dozen more crowded around. The warden showed them where the tools, ever ready, were kept; in two minutes they were out in the street and running full tilt.

To Crewe, it seemed that hours must have passed; but it was still daylight, with the sun in the west and lurid flame in the south. The man who had given the alarm pounded along beside Crewe, showing the way. Shrapnel showered roofs and street. One man was hit, and was lifted into a doorway by two others, who kept on. The street was a litter of glass and bricks now. A house was down at the corner, another farther on. . . .

They came to the school. It was a mass of skeleton ruin, and the house beyond was in a burst of flame. Between showed an enormous crater; everywhere was the slimy substratum mud that the great bombs brought up and spattered on the world.

"Walk east to the school. I'll be there." The words swept across Crewe's mind; he looked, but the street was empty, and the very fact that he looked brought a grim smile to his lips. Then it was gone, as he seized the arm of the guide.

"Where's the shelter, man?"

"Yonder." The other pointed to the crater. "From there, part under the building!"

A yell of warning went up. A wall was crumbling above; it came down with a shower of bricks and a cloud of dust. No one was hit, by luck. Crewe waved to the coal-man.

"Come on, Jem! Into the crater and at it. . . . This way, lads! One man stay back to watch the walls and give warning."

For those leaning ruined walls overhung the hell-pit.

A Policeman appeared, protesting the unauthorized work; Crewe cursed him roundly, and recognizing the voice of authority, the policeman pitched in with the rest. They were down now, down in the crater and attacking it as the guide directed. They would have to make a tunnel into the shelter, whose entrance was entirely gone.

The mud flew fast. They worked furiously, in five-minute spurts, giving everything they had, then letting a fresh hand at the job. A shattered arm came out, and part of a body—a child's body. Arkwright passed it up and went violently sick. Crewe relieved him and then tugged out something larger—a woman's body, to judge by the dress. They were getting in under the side of the crater now; a tunnel was developing. . . .

The air screamed; it was a siren bomb, hideously chilling the very soul as it came down. It landed somewhere near and the concussion knocked them all flat. A chorus of yells went up: the wall, the wall! They

scrambled for safety—but the wall held. Only a portion of it shivered and broke down.

Bells were clanging. A fireman showed up, another policeman, two women in the dark blue uniform of the ambulance service. A man in a tin hat pushed in and began to give orders. Crewe, a splatter of mud from head to foot, cursed anew and the other drew back. Arkwright came scrambling up, shaking with exhaustion.

"We're through!" he panted. "That is, we can get through, but—"

CREWE was down instantly, shoving himself at the hole. The other men hung back. One caught his arm and pointed.

"No go, mate! Look! The earth's fair trembling above. Best get at it slow and open it careful."

"Slow and careful, with kids suffocating? To hell with you!" snarled Crewe and shoved himself in headfirst. There was room and to spare. "Pass me a shovel!"

It came past him. He reached ahead with it; around and above, the earth was indeed in a quiver. Once, when a bomb landed somewhere, Crewe thought the game was up as mud slid around him, but the upper earth held.

He dug ahead with the shovel and passed the earth and mud out along his body; the shovel suddenly went through into nothing. He heard a faint, far voice, then other voices. Something came scrambling at him, face to face—a small boy, wide-eyed, frightened but cool.

"Jolly good work, sir!" sounded his thin voice. "Hold on. I'll send out the women first—"

The women! Crewe relaxed as he lay there, wiped mud out of his eyes, and laughed in an almost hysteric burst. A tiny girl came head-first at him, pushed by others behind. He took hold and passed her down along his body, heard a faint burst of cheering from behind. Then the next was in sight.

"Careful!" he said. "Don't kick the wall. Keep clear of it if you can."

She was gone, worming her way past him. Another was behind—the hideous siren scream of a bomb brought Crewe's heart into his throat. The screaming note did not fall, but held. It was coming close—by God, it was *close!* The concussion was momentarily paralyzing. Mud and earth slid all around, half buried him. Still the tunnel was open.

"Move fast, in there!" He found his voice suddenly, reached out and jerked at the next comer, a child with white terrorized face. She was almost unable to move, and sobbing aloud about the walls falling in. Crewe forced her past him.

How many? He had no idea. Every instant seemed an hour; the thought of that mass of earth and bricks above crushing down upon him was horrible. And it was coming down—the walls about him were narrowing, were settling. Shouts of warning came from behind. Someone got hold of his boots and pulled. He kicked out savagely, and that ended it. The face of the boy showed just ahead.

"That's all, sir," he shouted shrilly. "I'm coming now. That's all there are."

"Come ahead, lad." Crewe gripped his hand and dragged him along. "Tell them they can pull me out now."

The boy worked past him and was gone. Hands gripped Crewe's legs and pulled; he did not object this time. He was jerked out into the mud and slime. Voices were yelling frantic warning and alarm. As Crewe rolled clear, the whole face of the crater slumped down, the tunnel was gone, bricks from the falling wall above came tumbling all about.

For a moment, Crewe went limp. He came erect, two men holding him, others yammering cheers at one side, the infernal din constant in the heavens. An ambulance nurse wiped the mud from his lips and poured a dram of brandy into his mouth. This brought him around. Fire engines were clanging past; the children were being rushed away hurriedly; someone in authority was urging the men back to shelter, and Crewe found Arkwright wringing his hand hard. Then another man pushed through and shouted at Crewe:

"Grand thing, man! The greatest thing I've seen this war. Seven of those kids owe their lives to you! Let's have your name and address—"

Name? Crewe of Dunkirk? Perhaps that stiff dose of brandy had gone to his head, for a wild laugh came to his lips. A policeman shoved up, pad and pencil out.

"Name, sir, if you please."

"Go to hell!" rejoined Crewe, and flung away from them all. He broke into a run, struck them aside when they tried to stop him, and made off. An insane fury was upon him. Give his name, his accursed name—not much!

He made the underground shelter, wiping the mud from his face as he went, and found that the trains were still running.

IT was dark when he walked into his deserted office. The windows were shuttered tight. He found the electricity off, but the gas was on and he lit a jet. Shakily, he poured himself a drink, downed it, and dropped into his desk-chair. He could clean up and change his ruined clothes here, before heading for dinner and home.

"By all the rules of the books, that blasted wall should have fallen on me and turned me into a posthumous and redeemed hero!" he said. Reaching out for a cigarette and a match, he found his hand trembling. "But it didn't. What do you know about that, sir?"

He looked up at the picture on the wall, and paused, staring. He was sure of it this time; the eyes were smiling, the lips were smiling, the face was positively beaming at him. Then the gas-jet flickered again, and he lit his cigarette with a laugh.

"Well, sir, you almost fooled me that time!" A shiver went through him; he was cold, despite the drink. He had left both hat and overcoat back there at the crater, and his clothes were mud-soaked. His overcoat—good Lord!

For a moment, the thought shook him. They must find his name in hat and coat, and now there was no help for it. No help for it. Crewe of Dunkirk, Crewe of Dunkirk—the words fitted in with the ticking of the old-fashioned clock on the wall. Against the continuing inferno of the heavens outside, he could hear that remorseless ticking. . . .

"Well, it was a rum go, how I went there," he reflected aloud. The drink began to warm him and steady him. Again he thought that the pictured face smiled at him, but this time he refused to yield to the illusion.

"Yes, a queer bit of coincidence all around! *Walk east to the school; I'll be there.* I wonder who the deuce uttered those words over the phone? No one was waiting by the school, that's certain." A whimsical, almost startling fancy drifted across his mind, and his eyes went up again. "Unless you, perhaps, were waiting there—"

A sound jerked at him, a whirring sound. It was the old clock across the room, winding up to strike. It began to strike, most unmusically—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. . . . Seven o'clock.

"Seven o'clock," muttered Crewe. Suddenly he caught his breath; his eyes widened; his head lifted. "Seven kids pulled out of there—seven men dead. . . . Why, sir, by God! That's my debt wiped out, do you know it? Do you know what it means to me? Never mind what the world thinks. It's what I know that counts most, what you and I know—do you realize it, Father?"

In the flickering gas-flare, the eyes warmed and softened upon him. Now, more than ever, the resemblance between the two faces was sharply accentuated. Crewe of Ypres and Crewe of Dunkirk—each of them had the look of a man who has just been given the greatest distinction valor can achieve; there is no other look quite like it.

The Plymouth Express

ALEC SIMPSON, R. N., stepped from the platform at Newton Abbot into a first-class compartment of the Plymouth Express. A porter followed him with a heavy suitcase. He was about to swing it up to the rack, but the young sailor stopped him.

"No—leave it on the seat. I'll put it up later. Here you are."

"Thank you, sir." The porter, generously tipped, withdrew.

Doors banged; a stentorian voice shouted: "Plymouth only. Change for Torquay. Plymouth next stop." Then a whistle blew, and the train drew slowly out of the station.

Lieutenant Simpson had the carriage to himself. The December air was chilly, and he pulled up the window. Then he sniffed vaguely, and frowned. What a smell there was! Reminded him of that time in hospital, and the operation on his leg. Yes, chloroform; that was it!

He let the window down again, changing his seat to one with its back to the engine. He pulled a pipe out of his pocket and lit it. For a little time he sat inactive, looking out into the night and smoking.

At last he roused himself, and opening the suitcase, took out some papers and magazines, then closed the suitcase again and endeavored to shove it under the opposite seat—without success. Some hidden obstacle resisted it. He shoved harder with rising impatience, but it still stuck out halfway into the carriage.

"Why the devil won't it go in?" he muttered, and hauling it out completely, he stooped down and peered under the seat . . . .

A moment later a cry rang out into the night, and the great train came to an unwilling halt in obedience to the imperative jerking of the communication-cord.

"*MON AMI,*" said Poirot, "you have, I know, been deeply interested in this mystery of the Plymouth Express. Read this."

I picked up the note he flicked across the table to me. It was brief and to the point.

Dear Sir:

I shall be obliged if you will call upon me at your earliest convenience.

Yours faithfully,

EBENEZER HALLIDAY.

The connection was not clear to my mind, and I looked inquiringly at Poirot.

For answer he took up the newspaper and read aloud:

"'A sensational discovery was made last night. A young naval officer returning to Plymouth found under the seat of his compartment, the body of a woman, stabbed through the heart. The officer at once pulled the communication-cord, and the train was brought to a standstill. The woman, who was about thirty years of age, and richly dressed, has not yet been identified.'

"And later we have this: 'The woman found dead in the Plymouth Express has been identified as the Honorable Mrs. Rupert Carrington.' You see now, my friend? Or if you do not, I will add this—Mrs. Rupert Carrington was, before her marriage, Flossie Halliday, daughter of old man Halliday, the steel king of America."

"And he has sent for you? Splendid!"

"I did him a little service in the past—an affair of bearer bonds. And once, when I was in Paris for a royal visit, I had Mademoiselle Flossie pointed out to me. *La jolie petite pensionnaire!* She had the *jolie dot* too! It caused trouble. She nearly made a bad affair."

"How was that?"

"A certain Count de la Rochefour. *Un bien mauvais sujet!* A bad hat, as you would say. An adventurer pure and simple, who knew how to appeal to a romantic young girl. Luckily her father got wind of it in time. He took her back to America in haste. I heard of her marriage some years later, but I know nothing of her husband."

"H'm," I said. "The Honorable Rupert Carrington is no beauty, by all accounts. He'd pretty well run through his own money on the turf, and I should imagine old man Halliday's dollars came along in the nick of time. I should say that for a good-looking, well-mannered, utterly unscrupulous young scoundrel, it would be hard to find his match!"

"Ah, the poor little lady! *Elle n'est pas bien tombée!*"

"I fancy he made it pretty obvious at once that it was her money, and not she, that had attracted him. I believe they drifted apart almost at once. I have heard rumors lately that there was to be a definite legal separation."

"Old man Halliday is no fool. He would tie up her money pretty tight."

"I dare say. Anyway, I know as a fact that the Honorable Rupert is said to be extremely hard up."

"Ah-ha! I wonder—"

"You wonder what?"

"My good friend, do not jump down my throat like that. You are interested, I see. Supposing you accompany me to see Mr. Halliday. There is a taxi stand at the corner."

A FEW minutes sufficed to whirl us to the superb house in Park Lane rented by the American magnate. We were shown into the library, and almost immediately we were joined by a large, stout man, with piercing eyes and an aggressive chin.

"M. Poirot?" said Mr. Halliday. "I guess I don't need to tell you what I want you for. You've read the papers, and I'm never one to let the grass grow under my feet. I happened to hear you were in London, and I remembered the good work you did over those bonds. Never forget a name. I've got the pick of Scotland Yard, but I'll have my own man as well. Money no object. All the dollars were made for my little girl—and now she's gone, I'll spend my last cent to catch the damned scoundrel that did it! See? So it's up to you to deliver the goods."

Poirot bowed.

"I accept, monsieur, all the more willingly that I saw your daughter in Paris several times. And now I will ask you to tell me the circumstances of her journey to Plymouth and any other details that seem to you to bear upon the case."

"Well, to begin with," responded Halliday, "she wasn't going to Plymouth. She was going to join a house-party at Avonmead Court, the Duchess of Swansea's place. She left London by the twelve-fourteen from Paddington, arriving at Bristol (where she had to change) at two-fifty. The principal Plymouth expresses, of course, run via Westbury, and do not go near Bristol at all. The twelve-fourteen does a nonstop run to Bristol, afterward stopping at Weston, Taunton, Exeter and Newton Abbot. My daughter traveled alone in her carriage, which was reserved as far as Bristol, her maid being in a third-class carriage in the next coach."

Poirot nodded, and Mr. Halliday went on: "The party at Avonmead Court was to be a very gay one, with several balls, and in consequence my daughter had with her nearly all her jewels—amounting in value, perhaps, to about a hundred thousand dollars."

"*Un moment,*" interrupted Poirot. "Who had charge of the jewels? Your daughter, or the maid?"

"My daughter always took charge of them herself, carrying them in a small blue morocco case."

"Continue, monsieur."

"At Bristol the maid, Jane Mason, collected her mistress' dressing-bag and wraps, which were with her, and came to the door of Flossie's comment. To her intense surprise, my daughter told her that she was not getting out at Bristol, but was going on farther. She directed Mason to get out the luggage and put it in the cloak-room. She could have tea in the refreshment-room, but she was to wait at the station for her mistress, who would return to Bristol by an up-train in the course of the afternoon. The maid, although very much astonished, did as she was told. She put the luggage in the cloak-room and had some tea. But up-train after up-train came in, and her mistress did not appear. After the arrival of the last train, she left the luggage where it was, and went to a hotel near the station for the night. This morning she read of the tragedy, and returned to town by the first available train."

"Is there nothing to account for your daughter's sudden change of plan?"

"Well, there is this: According to Jane Mason, at Bristol, Flossie was no longer alone in her carriage. There was a man in it who stood looking out of the farther window so that she could not see his face."

"The train was a corridor one, of course?"

"Yes."

"Which side was the corridor?"

"On the platform side. My daughter was standing in the corridor as she talked to Mason."

"And there is no doubt in your mind—excuse me!" He got up, and carefully straightened the inkstand which was a little askew. *"Je vous demande pardon,"* he continued, reseating himself. "It affects my nerves to see anything crooked. Strange, is it not? I was saying, monsieur, that there is no doubt in your mind, as to this probably unexpected meeting being the cause of your daughter's sudden change of plan?"

"It seems the only reasonable supposition."

"You have no idea as to who the gentleman in question might be?"

The millionaire hesitated for a moment, and then replied:

"No—I do not know at all."

"Now—as to the discovery of the body?"

"It was discovered by a young naval officer who at once gave the alarm. There was a doctor on the train. He examined the body. She had been first chloroformed, and then stabbed. He gave it as his opinion that she had been dead about four hours, so it must have been done not long after leaving Bristol—probably between there and Weston, possibly between Weston and Taunton."

One of the really famous fiction characters of our day is Hercule Poirot, a detective with a sense of humor who started his career in Blue Book, and we are proud to reprint from a 1923 issue this story—

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

"And the jewel-case?"

"The jewel-case, M. Poirot, was missing."

"One thing more, monsieur. Your daughter's fortune—to whom does it pass at her death?"

"Flossie made a will soon after her marriage, leaving everything to her husband." He hesitated for a minute, and then went on: "I may as well tell you, Monsieur Poirot, that I regard my son-in-law as an unprincipled scoundrel, and that, by my advice, my daughter was on the eve of freeing herself from him by legal means—no difficult matter. I settled her money upon her in such a way that he could not touch it during her lifetime, but although they have lived entirely apart for some years, she has frequently acceded to his demands for money, rather than face an open scandal. However, I was determined to put an end to this. At last Flossie agreed, and my lawyers were instructed to take proceedings."

"And where is Monsieur Carrington?"

"In town. I believe he was away in the country yesterday, but he returned last night."

Poirot considered a little while. Then he said: "I think that is all, monsieur."

"You would like to see the maid, Jane Mason?"

"If you please."

HALLIDAY rang the bell, and gave a short order to the footman.

A few minutes later Jane Mason entered the room, a respectable, hard-featured woman, as emotionless in the face of tragedy as only a good servant can be.

"You will permit me to put a few questions? Your mistress, she was quite as usual before starting yesterday morning? Not excited or flurried?"

"Oh, no sir!"

"But at Bristol she was quite different?"

"Yes sir, regular upset—so nervous she didn't seem to know what she was saying."

"What did she say exactly?"

"Well, sir, as near as I can remember, she said: 'Mason, I've got to alter my plans. Something has happened—I mean, I'm not getting out here after all. I must go on. Get out the luggage and put it in the cloak-room; then have some tea, and wait for me in the station.'

"'Wait for you here, ma'am?' I asked.

"'Yes, yes. Don't leave the station. I shall return by a later train. I don't know when. It mayn't be until quite late.'

"'Very well, ma'am,' I says. It wasn't my place to ask questions, but I thought it very strange."

"It was unlike your mistress, eh?"

"Very unlike her, sir."

"What did you think?"

"Well, sir, I thought it was to do with the gentleman in the carriage. She didn't speak to him, but she turned round once or twice as though to ask him if she was doing right."

"But you didn't see the gentleman's face?"

"No sir; he stood with his back to me all the time."

"Can you describe him at all?"

"He had on a light fawn overcoat, and a traveling-cap. He was tall and slender, like, and the back of his head was dark."

"You didn't know him?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so, sir."

"It was not your master, Mr. Carrington, by any chance?"

Mason looked rather startled.

"Oh! I don't think so, sir!"

"But you are not *sure?"*

"It was about the master's build, sir—but I never thought of it being him. We so seldom saw him. . . . I couldn't say it *wasn't* him!"

Poirot picked up a pin from the carpet, and frowned at it severely; then he continued: "Would it be possible for the man to have entered the train at Bristol before you reached the carriage?"

Mason considered.

"Yes sir, I think it would. My compartment was very crowded, and it was some minutes before I could get out—and then there was a very large crowd on the platform, and that delayed me too. But he'd only have had a minute or two to speak to the mistress, that way. I took it for granted that he'd come along the corridor."

"That is more probable, certainly."

He paused, still frowning.

"You know how the mistress was dressed, sir?"

"The papers give a few details, but I would like you to confirm them."

"She was wearing a white fox fur toque, sir, with a white spotted veil, and a blue frieze coat and skirt—the shade of blue they call electric."

"H'm, rather striking."

"Yes," remarked Mr. Halliday. "Inspector Japp is in hopes that that may help us to fix the spot where the crime took place. Anyone who saw her would remember her."

"*Précisément!* —Thank you, mademoiselle."

The maid left the room.

"Well!" Poirot got up briskly. "That is all I can do here—except, monsieur, that I would ask you to tell me everything—but *everything!*"

"I have done so."

"You are sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Then there is nothing more to be said. I must decline the case."

"Why?"

"Because you have not been frank with me."

"I assure you—"

"No, you are keeping something back."

There was a moment's pause, and then Halliday drew a paper from his pocket and handed it to my friend.

"I guess that's what you're after, Monsieur Poirot—though how you know about it fairly gets my goat!"

Poirot smiled, and unfolded the paper. It was a letter written in thin sloping handwriting. Poirot read it aloud.

"'Chère Madame:

"'It is with infinite pleasure that I look forward to the felicity of meeting you again. After your so amiable reply to my letter, I can hardly restrain my impatience. I have never forgotten those days in Paris. It is most cruel that you should be leaving London tomorrow. However, before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think, I shall have the joy of beholding once more the lady whose image has ever reigned supreme in my heart.

"'Believe, chère madame, all the assurances of my most devoted and unaltered sentiments—

"'Armand de la Rochefour.'"

Poirot handed the letter back to Halliday with a bow.

"I fancy, monsieur, that you did not know that your daughter intended renewing her acquaintance with the Count de la Rochefour?"

"It came as a thunderbolt to me! I found this letter in my daughter's handbag. As you probably know, Monsieur Poirot, this so-called count is an adventurer of the worst type."

Poirot nodded.

"But I want to know how you knew of the existence of this letter?"

My friend smiled. "Monsieur, I did not. But to track footmarks, and recognize cigarette-ash is not sufficient for a detective. He must also be a good psychologist! I knew that you disliked and mistrusted your son-in-law. He benefits by your daughter's death; the maid's description of the mysterious man bears a sufficient resemblance to him. Yet you are not keen on his track! Why? Surely because your suspicions lie in another direction. Therefore you were keeping something back."

"You're right, Monsieur Poirot. I was sure of Rupert's guilt until I found this letter. It unsettled me horribly."

"Yes. The Count says: 'Before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think.' Obviously he would not want to wait until you should get wind of his reappearance. Was it he who traveled down from London by the twelve-fourteen, and came along the corridor to your daughter's compartment? The Count de la Rochefour is also, if I remember rightly, tall and dark!"

The millionaire nodded.

"Well, monsieur, I will wish you good day. Scotland Yard, has, I presume, a list of the jewels?"

"Yes. I believe Inspector Japp is here now if you would like to see him."

JAPP was an old friend of ours, and greeted Poirot with a sort of affectionate contempt.

"And how are you, monsieur? No bad feeling between us, though we *have* got our different ways of looking at things. How are the 'little gray cells,' eh? Going strong?"

Poirot beamed upon him. "They function, my good Japp; assuredly they do!"

"Then that's all right. Think it was the Honorable Rupert, or a crook? We're keeping an eye on all the regular places, of course. We shall know if the shiners are disposed of, and of course whoever did it isn't going to keep them to admire their sparkle. Not likely! I'm trying to find out where Rupert Carrington was yesterday. Seems a bit of a mystery about it. I've got a man watching him."

"A great precaution, but perhaps a day late," suggested Poirot gently.

"You always will have your joke, Monsieur Poirot. Well, I'm off to Paddington. Bristol, Weston, Taunton, that's my beat. So long."

"You will come round and see me this evening, and tell me the result?"

"Sure thing, if I'm back."

"That good Inspector believes in matter in motion," murmured Poirot as our friend departed. "He travels; he measures footprints; he collects mud and cigarette-ash! He is extremely busy! He is zealous beyond words! And if I mentioned psychology to him, do you know what he would do, my friend? He would smile! He would say to himself: 'Poor old Poirot! He ages! He grows senile!' Japp is the 'younger generation knocking on the door.' And *ma foi!* They are so busy knocking that they do not notice that the door is open!"

"And what are you going to do?"

"As we have *carte blanche,* I shall expend threepence in ringing up the Ritz—where you may have noticed our Count is staying. After that, as my feet are a little damp, and I have sneezed twice, I shall return to my rooms and make myself a *tisano* over the spirit lamp!"

I DID not see Poirot again until the following morning. I found him placidly finishing his breakfast.

"Well?" I inquired eagerly. "What has happened?"

"Nothing."

"But Japp?"

"I have not seen him."

"The Count?"

"He left the Ritz the day before yesterday."

"The day of the murder?"

"Yes."

"Then that settles it! Rupert Carrington is cleared."

"Because the Count de la Rochefour has left the Ritz? You go too fast, my friend."

"Anyway, he must be followed, arrested! But what could be his motive?"

"One hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewelry is a very good motive for anyone. No, the question to my mind is: why kill her? Why not simply steal the jewels? She would not prosecute."

"Why not?"

"Because she is a woman, *mon ami.* She once loved this man. Therefore she would suffer her loss in silence. And the Count, who is an extremely good psychologist where women are concerned,—hence his successes,—would know that perfectly well! On the other hand, if Rupert Carrington killed her, why take the jewels, which would incriminate him fatally?"

"As a blind."

"Perhaps you are right, my friend. Ah, here is Japp! I recognize his knock."

The Inspector was beaming good-humoredly.

"Morning, Poirot. Only just got back. I've done some good work! And you?"

"Me, I have arranged my ideas," replied Poirot placidly.

Japp laughed heartily.

"Old chap's getting on in years," he observed beneath his breath to me.

"That won't do for us young folk," he said aloud.

"*Quel dommage?*" Poirot inquired.

"Well, do you want to hear what I've done?"

"You permit me to make a guess? You have found the knife with which the crime was committed, by the side of the line between Weston and Taunton, and you have interviewed the paper-boy who spoke to Mrs. Carrington at Weston!"

Japp's jaw fell. "How on earth did you know? Don't tell me it was those almighty 'little gray cells' of yours!"

"I am glad you admit for once that they are *all mighty!* Tell me, did she give the paper-boy a shilling for himself?"

"No, it was half a crown!" Japp had recovered his temper, and grinned. "Pretty extravagant, these rich Americans!"

"And in consequence the boy did not forget her?"

"Not he. Half-crowns don't come his way every day. She hailed him and bought two magazines. One had a picture of a girl in blue on the cover. 'That'll match me,' she said. Oh! He remembered her perfectly. Well, that was enough for me. By the doctor's evidence, the crime *must* have been committed before Taunton. I guessed they'd throw the knife away at once, and I walked down the line looking for it; and sure enough, there it was. I made inquiries at Taunton about our man, but of course it's a big station, and it wasn't likely they'd notice him. He probably got back to London by a later train."

Poirot nodded. "Very likely."

"But I found another bit of news when I got back. They're passing the jewels, all right! That large emerald was pawned last night—by one of the regular lot. Who do you think it was?"

"I don't know—except that he was a short man."

Japp stared. "Well, you're right there. He's short enough. It was Red Narky."

"Who is Red Narky?" I asked.

"A particularly sharp jewel-thief, sir. And not one to stick at murder. Usually works with a woman—Gracie Kidd; but she doesn't seem to be in it this time—unless she's got off to Holland with the rest of the swag."

"You've arrested Narky?"

"Sure thing. But mind you, it's the other man we want—the man who went down with Mrs. Carrington in the train. He was the one who planned the job, right enough. But Narky won't squeal on a pal."

I noticed that Poirot's eyes had become very green.

"I think," he said gently, "that I can find Narky's pal for you, all right."

"One of your little ideas, eh?" Japp eyed Poirot sharply. "Wonderful how you manage to deliver the goods sometimes, at your age and all. Devil's own luck, of course."

"Perhaps, perhaps," murmured my friend. "Hastings, my hat. And the brush. So! My galoshes, if it still rains! We must not undo the good work of that *tisano. Au revoir,* Japp!"

"Good luck to you, Poirot."

Poirot hailed the first taxi we met, and directed the driver to Park Lane.

When we drew up before Halliday's house, he skipped out nimbly, paid the driver and rang the bell. To the footman who opened the door he made a request in a low voice, and we were immediately taken upstairs. We went up to the top of the house, and were shown into a small neat bedroom

Poirot's eyes roved round the room and fastened themselves on a small black trunk. He knelt in front of it, scrutinized the labels on it, and took a small twist of wire from his pocket.

"Ask Mr. Halliday if he will be so kind as to mount to me here," he said over his shoulder to the footman.

(It is suggested that the reader pause in his perusal of the story at this point, make his own solution of the mystery—and then see how close he comes to that of the author.—The Editors.)

The man departed, and Poirot gently coaxed the lock of the trunk with a practiced hand. In a few minutes the lock gave, and he raised the lid of the trunk. Swiftly he began rummaging among the clothes it contained, flinging them out on the floor.

There was a heavy step on the stairs, and Halliday entered the room.

"What in hell are you doing here?" he demanded, staring.

"I was looking, monsieur, for *this.*" Poirot withdrew from the trunk a coat and skirt of bright blue frieze, and a small toque of white fox fur.

"What are you doing with my trunk?" I turned to see that the maid, Jane Mason, had entered the room.

"If you will just shut the door, Hastings. Thank you. Yes, and stand with your back against it. Now, Mr. Halliday, let me introduce you to Gracie Kidd, otherwise Jane Mason, who will shortly rejoin her accomplice, Red Narky, under the kind escort of Inspector Japp."

POIROT waved a deprecating hand. "It was of the most simple!" He helped himself to more caviar.

"It was the maid's insistence on the clothes that her mistress was wearing that first struck me. Why was she so anxious that our attention should be directed to them? I reflected that we had only the maid's word for the mysterious man in the carriage at Bristol. As far as the doctor's evidence went, Mrs. Carrington might easily have been murdered *before* reaching Bristol. But if so, then the maid must be an accomplice. And if she were an accomplice, she would not wish this point to rest on her evidence alone. The clothes Mrs. Carrington was wearing were of a striking nature. A maid usually has a good deal of choice as to what her mistress shall wear. Now if, after Bristol, anyone saw a lady in a bright blue coat and skirt, and a fur toque, he will be quite ready to swear he has seen Mrs. Carrington.

"I began to reconstruct. The maid would provide herself with duplicate clothes. She and her accomplice chloroform and stab Mrs. Carrington between London and Bristol, probably taking advantage of a tunnel. Her body is rolled under the seat; and the maid takes her place. At Weston she must make herself noticed. How? In all probability, a newspaper-boy will be selected. She will insure his remembering her by giving him a large tip. She also drew his attention to the color of her dress by a remark about one of the magazines. After leaving Weston, she throws the knife out of the window to mark the place where the crime presumably occurred, and changes her clothes, or buttons a long mackintosh over them. At Taunton she leaves the train and returns to Bristol as soon as possible, where her accomplice has duly left the luggage in the cloak-room. He hands over the ticket and himself returns to London. She waits on the platform, carrying out her rôle, goes to a hotel for the night and returns to town in the morning, exactly as she said.

"When Japp returned from his expedition, he confirmed all my deductions. He also told me that a well-known crook was passing the jewels. I knew that whoever it was would be the exact opposite of the man Jane Mason described. When I heard that it was Red Narky, who always worked with Gracie Kidd—well, I knew just where to find her."

"And the Count?"

"The more I thought of it, the more I was convinced that he had nothing to do with it. That gentleman is much too careful of his own skin to risk murder. It would be out of keeping with his character."

"Well, Monsieur Poirot," said Halliday, "I owe you a big debt. And the check I write after lunch won't go near to settling it."

Poirot smiled modestly, and murmured to me: "The good Japp, he shall get the official credit, all right, but though he has got his Gracie Kidd, I think that I, as the Americans say, have got his goat!"

Any Senator was a personage; Senator Fenton was distinguished. Everybody stared at Miss Allie. "She is very pretty, Jack!" Belle murmured.

The Iron Rainbow

They schemed for it in Washington—worked and fought and gambled for it at end of rail on the frontier.

by GORDON YOUNG

The Story Thus Far:

THE town was a jam of men, piled up in eager restlessness as if waiting for the railroad to go on, so they too could flow westward—seeking the end of the track, no matter where it lay, as men seek the end of the rainbow, defying danger.

Young Jack Harringson of the engineering staff looked up from his field-book that fateful night when the kid rodman burst in, shouting: "*Jack!* Rhobb's dead! Fight over at the Empire. Nobody meant to kill him. But that gambler King Collins killed a Texan, and there was a lot of shooting—and Rhobb's dead."

"Yeah!" Harringson said slowly. "How do you know nobody meant it?"

Now that Rhobb, who was superintendent of construction and Jack's friend, was dead, Hallard would have everything his own way. And Jack had written to his father General Harringson, the president of the road, in Washington, criticising Hallard's management.

The quarrel came to a head soon afterward, and impetuous young Jack resigned. But his letter perhaps bore fruit in Washington, for the General decided to send a man out to railhead to investigate conditions. Moreover another Washington railroad chief, feeble old Senator Fenton, decided to go out and have a look-see for himself, and to take his lovely daughter Allie with him. And therein lay much dynamite. For though Allie had an "understanding" with Jack Harringson, she had been flirting with Royal Weldron, brilliant young scion of the Ganford clan, who hated the Harringsons and were determined to get control of the railroad And Weldron under the assumed name of Roy Ford was now on his way to this railhead town of Fenton also, in furtherance of the Ganford plot.

Jack Harringson decided to go farther West; and he thought of pretty Molly McVey, who lived in a boxcar with a crabbed and often drunken grandfather who got out a newspaper. Go West he would, but not alone.

But Pop McVey said to him: "Don't think that we McVeys are flattered by the General's son visiting us! Don't ever talk marrying to Molly!"

The town was a jam of men. . . . Sundry newcomers including that lovable old scoundrel Doc Baron and his train acquaintance Lathrop—who was far too polished and keen for the cattle-man he claimed to be—were watching Belle Menlinton deal faro—Belle, who was secretly the wife of King Collins, and dealt a subtly crooked game. They were watching so closely that she had to let young Harringson win a big jackpot. King Collins provoked a quarrel, but Lathrop interfered in time to save the clumsy boy from King's deadly derringer—clamped a hand on the gambler's wrist, gave the upstretched arm a wrenching shake that set the gambler's finger against the trigger, and the ball struck the ceiling. Then Lathrop brought an open palm up against the King's cheek.

"You've another gun, gambler! Reach for it!" he said. But Collins did not dare reach for it—he slunk out, instead. *(The story continues in detail:)*

"MY God!" a man blurted at Lathrop, "why didn't you *shoot* him?"

Lathrop said, "He's been worse than shot!" and turning from men that wanted to talk about it, pointed to the money on the faro table and told Belle, "I'll pick that up some other time." Before she could reply he walked away, as if to get out of the barroom and away from the excited gabble and the loud way men wanted to talk to him, thinking it praise.

Jack Harringson gazed at Belle with almost an expression of just waking up. "Why the hell did that gambler want to shoot me? And that Lathrop—*quick!* He did it all quicker than I could think about what to do! And saved my bacon, too, I guess."

Belle did not look at him but said, "Wait, Jack!" She was breathing hard, yet gave a smile to the men again bunching up about the table and said coaxingly, "If you boys don't mind, take up your bets. Let's call it off for tonight. I don't feel like finishing the deal."

No one objected and many told her so. Players reached for their chips, some with a carelessness that made a mixture of stacks and started unquarrelsome disputes over ownership.

Belle glanced toward Ned Patton and called through the good-natured wrangling as to which chips were whose, "Take care of the layout, Ned!" But she put the cards that had been drawn, and the silver deal-box, into the deep pocket of her skirt. She never let cards and box get out of her possession. Ned Patton nodded.

Men pocketed their chips and straggled to the bar. Harringson stood there, waiting for his money. It looked as if Belle had forgotten him.

Men could play with coin but were paid off in chips. The chips were cashed at the bar. That was just another of Taggart's wrinkles to help business. Nobody cashed in without buying a drink or two, and often the winnings came back to the house in treats for everybody.

Belle's rapid fingers counted and stacked chips. Without lifting her face she set short stack after stack before Harringson. She had not forgotten him, and leaned closer, but still did not look up as she told him in a hurried throaty purr, "Cash in and leave town, Jack! Get out—like you planned. Get out or they'll try to kill you, too—like Rhobb!"

Belle swirled away from the table and walked rapidly as if she did not hear the men's voices, offering to treat and wanting to talk of how the gambler had been called, and of the man who had called him.

She ran up two flights of stairs and stopped with an arm against the wall, a moment. She was afraid, dreading to meet the King. She was strangely without any feeling of pleasure at having seen him insulted more than she had ever seen any man insulted in her life. He had been broken and twisted just as much as if under a club. Belle always

Illustrated by Raymond Sisley

shuddered when she saw people hurt, and she didn't hate the King enough to be glad. If he had been killed outright, she would have felt a relief which would have been in itself a kind of happiness. This had been too much like torture. The man Lathrop seemed to know how—know how with whatever he wanted to do. "He's been worse than shot!" Lathrop had answered, offhand. Yet she was glad that it had happened that way rather than the way it would have happened if the King had shot down young Harringson. And she wished that she could pull back those last two words she had flung to him; but the murder of Rhobb had seemed to her such a senseless foul thing, and Rhobb's name had simply blown through her lips without her meaning to say it.

Belle went on down the hall, and for a moment hovered listening at a door. She opened it without knocking. The King sat there facing the door as rigidly as a corpse, upright. He had known she would come.

SHE closed the door and stood against it, looked at him, and waited. One side of his gray, death-colored face was splotched with red. "You," said the King, dragging the words slowly, "let him win!"

Belle's lips flashed back: "That's a lie!" One thing she would not do, ever, was to let the King see that she was afraid of him.

"You could have squeezed that jack!"

"I'd already squeezed the other one!"

He said in a mean cold voice: "I don't believe you!"

Belle's hand dipped into the deep pocket of her skirt. She drew out the deal-box, put it into her other hand, then drew out the cards that had been played, and flung them at him. They swirled in a scattering flutter and settled on the floor, some face up, some face down. She put the box back into her skirt pocket, and waited.

"What do we pay Patton for?" he asked, unyielding.

"Do you think that man Lathrop wasn't keeping tab on the jacks? Don't be a fool, King! He's no railroader—or cattle-man!"

"Who is he?"

"I don't know."

The King's eyes seemed almost lidless, he could hold an unwinking stare so long. He studied Belle's face; then, accusingly: "You wanted Harringson to win!"

"That's a lie!" Her dark-tempered fierceness would not give an inch. "The cards came up so he *had* to win! If the jack of spades hadn't showed, that man Lathrop would have had my deck spread out on the table for everybody to see that I was running doubles through the deal!"

The King put his teeth together, drew back his lips and said: "Oh, no—no, he wouldn't! I'd have killed him first!"

Belle didn't say anything. She knew that he was trying to pull together what little shreds of vanity and self-assurance were left. The coward inside the King had been jerked out, naked, before men's eyes; and now was trying to hide that shame from her—perhaps even from himself.

"Don't you believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you," she replied, to be agreeable.

He leveled an accusing arm, glared at her: "Then why didn't you deal it under? I'd have taken care of any trouble anybody tried to make!" The King rubbed his wrist and told her: "He nearly broke my arm. It's sprained yet. If it hadn't been for that, I'd have shot him quick enough when he let go of me!"

Belle took a long breath slowly, said: "Yes. Of course, you would've!"

The King drew back his head. "Don't think we won't meet again!"

There was a tap-tapping on the door. It was Taggart's knock. He tried the door before she opened it, and in he came with a pop-eyed fluster, asking: "What happened? My God, what happened? Belle? You, King! Men down there say—"

Belle said wearily: "He caught the King's arm, nearly broke it, then dared him to draw. A dirty trick that he'll be sorry for—you can bet on that, Berny! The King'll tell you. I'm tired, and going to my room. Tell Roy Ford I'll not play tonight. I've had enough."

She opened the door, swirled through it and brought it to with a slam. She felt a little sickened by having helped to clothe the coward's nakedness, and the worst of it was that she couldn't quite explain to herself just why she had done it. "I'm afraid of him. I *am* afraid of him!" she admitted, and wondered if even that was quite true.

Belle put the key into the lock of her door and turned it without pressure. For a moment she tried to recall when she had left the room. Perhaps she had forgotten to lock it. Now and then she did.

She went in and fastened the door with the inside hook-and-eye lock. There was enough moonlight shimmering through the two windows so that she didn't have to strike a match or feel her way. One small lamp was on the dresser, under her mirror; another, and larger, was on the small square table near the center of the room.

For a moment she put a hand to her head and leaned an elbow on the dresser, with her thoughts in a jumble and all of them unhappy. She thought: "I wish I had a drink. I wish I had a lot to drink!" She could see a sleepless night before her, but she did not want to be with people—not even with Roy Ford and his good-spender friends.

Belle knew with inner bitterness that Roy Ford expected her to be flattered, even excited, because he often found her companionship pleasing when he had nothing else to interest him. He sometimes even went to the Tip-Top, too. And she pretended to be flattered, even excited because she liked his wine, liked the poker-games in his room, and she liked riding out after the greyhounds. But she did not like knowing that Mr. Ford considered himself remotely above her—as a "gentleman" is above a "card woman." That it was true did not make her feel any more pleased, but she did not really dislike him. She knew pretty much what he was like inside. She had known other "gentlemen."

Belle dropped her arm, murmured, "Oh, well." She took the deal-box from her pocket and set it on the dresser, then idly, as a matter of habit, leaned toward the mirror. Only a blob of shadow gave back her reflection. She fingered the match-box, struck a light, lifted the lamp-chimney. The flame flickered along the cold wick, and she replaced the chimney and reached up to loosen a jet earring. As she did so, she again bent to the mirror. Her face froze, staringly, in a look that went over the reflection of her shoulder. She dropped her arms stiffly and turned about.

Lathrop was standing across the room in what had been a shadowed corner. His hat was off, in his hand. He said: "Good evening. I came and waited."

BELLE eyed him; she did not say, "What do you want?" She almost said it, but it seemed stupid even to pretend not to know what he wanted. She thought he had come to tell her he was now a partner in her game. That was a man's way. A woman could never work her game alone; there must always be some man who took the profits out of her hand. He would make a good partner. He looked seriously businesslike. There was no smirk of assurance. She hated men who smirked as if expecting her to be pleased because they were interested in her. He was tall, and had straight shoulders, but there was nothing rigid about him. He looked strong inside and out; and his blue eyes, even if directly watchful, were not unfriendly—or too friendly.

Belle told him coolly: "I do not receive men in my room!" Then: "How did you get in here?"

"I stole some keys downstairs, tried several, and one fitted." He was softly matter-of-fact. As he spoke he came closer, and she did not move back, but her muscles tightened, meaning to slap him if he tried to put a hand on her. But it seemed that nothing of that kind was in his thought. He said quietly:

"I didn't come to ask you who that gambler is; but now that I am here, I'd like to know why he wanted to kill young Harringson?"

Belle shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. . . . The King," she tried to explain, "is just a gambler, half sick, I guess—he looks it—and he gets mean sometimes. You'd better look out!" Her warning had an almost friendly sound. "He *is* mean!"

"Yes. He meant to kill that boy. I still think you know why. And whether or not you want to, Miss Belle, you are going to have to trust me!"

"Oh, I am? In just what way, if you please?" Then, as if it was as well to bring the subject right out in the open, she told him: "You've probably heard that I bank my own game. But I don't! So if you want to talk about that, you will have to go to Mr. Taggart!"

"I'm not interested in your game. Not the faro game." He asked: "May I?" Belle faced around and saw that he was indicating the deal-box, and he lifted his eyebrows with a trace of amusement, waiting for her permission.

"Well, go ahead. You'll find that is an honest box!"

He tossed his hat toward a chair. "Thanks." He picked up the box, turned it over and over, then put it back on the dresser and pressed down. There were the cards of the unfinished deal in it. He drew one, held it up—and slid the second card out from behind it right before her nose. He knew how to work the combination of the costly and best "double deal" box she had ever seen; and trapped, she could only ask: "Who are you?"

Lathrop put the two cards on the dresser. "Cattle-man."

Belle solemnly said: "Phooey!" Then, quickly: "Did you meet Doc Baron on the train and play cards with him?"

"Yes."

"Did he win?"

"He got more money away from me than I got from him, if that is what you mean."

"Then what did you do?" she snapped.

"We became friends."

"Oh." Her eyes followed his hand as he again picked up her crooked deal-box. He showed it to her, placed it down, pointed toward it.

"That is the reason, one reason, you will have to trust me. I knew the deal-box was as crooked as a dog's hind-leg. Knew it almost before I saw you make a turn. Your deal-board, for one thing—I know the man that makes them. You don't have to use it, though. The fellers here don't expect you to count the cards before you start to deal. They like you. They think you are honest."

Belle was not trembling, but she felt trembly. She could tell that he was hedging her in from all sides with the implied threat that he could show the men who believed that she was honest just how crooked her play was; and he seemed to know that would hurt her. Not merely ruin her as a gambler, but hurt her as woman, hurt the pride she had in having men like and trust her.

"I'm awfully tired," she said, and went to a chair, sat down with her hands in her lap and squeezed her fingers tensely. "Just what is it you want?"

"This," he said, motioning toward the deal-box without looking, "is all right when there is nothing bigger to play for. Nobody in town has a much better chance than you to learn of what goes on. You are a clever woman. Men like you. Sometimes they talk to you, and sometimes you merely overhear. Two groups, I understand, are fighting for the control of this railroad, and—" He paused, and Belle's body grew tense. "I want to know why you think the Harringson crowd will lose?"

"The Doc told you?"

"Yes."

Belle's look focused on the carpet near her feet, and she murmured: "I might have known. I *did* know better!" A frightened thought whipped her glance back to his face. She had weakly made a confession of many things to the old Doc. She asked anxiously: "What else did he tell you?"

Betty didn't really feel surprised when a hand touched her shoulder. . . . Lathrop had come. It wasn't easy to speak, but she said, "All right."

"I have read the article, and I wish to inquire,

For the first time Lathrop really smiled at her, and it was a pleasant smile as if in friendliness, but what he said gave her a chill. *"That* was not very clever of you! You admit there is much else to tell. Maybe I can get it out of him—if you won't tell me."

Belle put back her head, shut her eyes, moved her head from side to side slowly, said dispiritedly: "I am not clever. I'm just not!" She straightened up. "I guess you win. Suppose we both put our cards on the table and see what we can do about it. Sit down, please. When you stand there and look at me, it is as if we were about to quarrel. And tell me one thing, will you? How did you keep tab on my turns tonight? That was the first thing that scared me about you!" She was carefully trying to bring friendliness into the conversation. She knew she couldn't get the best of this man by trying to be stubborn and angry. "Tell me, won't you? How did you do it? And who are you? And do sit down—please!"

"Now," he said with amused approval, "you are being a clever lady! It will be much more pleasant, and more successful, if we work together." Then he told her with quiet seriousness: "I'll give you this promise, lady: If you will put your cards on the table and not try to hold out on me, I'll play this railroad game to win, and you and the Doc can have as much out of it as I do."

He sounded convincing, but she didn't in the least believe him. It was too big a promise, too readily made. However, she said interestedly: "That's fair enough, Mr. Lathrop."

Her confidence and self-control were coming back as her jangled nerves tightened up for the familiar game. "First," she said, "tell me about yourself."

"All right. I'm a gambler—sometimes. I happen to have a good memory about some things. Faces, figures, names—cards." He opened a hand as if concealing nothing from her, and said: "I met your old Doc on the train and liked him. Tonight, with a little too much whisky on board, he came to me. Told me what you had told him. That's why I am here. It's your turn now. Face-up, you said—all the cards!"

"Oh, but really I don't know anything, not actually! I just talked to the Doc that way. He's old; he's shabby and almost beaten; and it hurt me to see him. I wanted to give him some—well, hope. Something to plan for. I thought afterward that he might get me into trouble. And you see, he has!" Belle's face lighted quite playfully. "All I know is just what everybody says there in the saloon." Her look changed earnestly: "I wouldn't bet that the Harringsons lose control!"

Lathrop reached from the chair, picked up his hat, and rose. "So that's the way of it?"

"That's the way of it," Belle repeated with an apparent tinge of regret that she really didn't know more. "You see, after all, I'm only a gambler. Card woman! I don't meddle with anything outside of that. I don't, honestly."

sir, just what statement you complain of?"

Then she came out of the chair with her eyes wide and frightened, for he had reached out, picked up the deal-box, dropped it into his side coat pocket. He looked at her and did not say a word. He didn't need to say a word.

Belle dragged up the words: "You are going to—" Her throat was hoarse and choked. She could see the men, men that liked her, watching him take cards, two at a time, from a box supposedly constructed to prevent just that. There could be no denial. Her name was engraved on it. She suddenly threw out her hands and begged: *"Don't!"*

"Miss Belle, I don't want to."

"Then why do that to me? Ruin me—more than ruin!"

Even now there was no sharp edge of threatening in his tone as he told her, with a quiet air of explaining: "When I go after something, I don't always get it—but I'll do anything that seems to help me get it. That is, when I'm convinced that what I want is worth having And information such as you have—or pretended to have—is certainly worth the trouble of getting. Please don't try to deceive me. You may succeed for a time."

She felt weak, not strong enough to fight even evasively. There was something so like courtesy in his attitude that her anger was not stirred. She was tired, cornered, and confused. She said, "I'll tell you," and closed her eyes. Then she opened her eyes to ask: "You will never let anybody know I've told you?"

He took the silver box from his pocket and put it back on the dresser. "No. Certainly not."

Belle spoke slowly, choosing words. "All I actually know is that Roy Ford believes the Harringsons will lose the road. And—and—he—wants—them—to—lose it!"

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. He lives here at the hotel. He is wealthy. He talks sometimes when he has been drinking. He and Plummer are promoting Plummer City. He does not like the Harringsons."

"Has he had trouble with the young man, Jack?"

"I don't think so. I don't know that they have ever met. My guess is—and it *is* a guess!—that Roy Ford is a Southerner. General Harringson, as you know, isn't liked in the South. You are a Southerner too. Aren't you?"

"Sometimes. Just why is your Mr. Ford so sure?"

"I don't know. I have never asked. I listen to what he says. I know he would get suspicious if I—so I just don't. But he *is* sure. Sometimes jokes about it a little. As, for instance, he has said two or three times he would give anything to see the old General's face when the road is jerked out from under him. That is about all I can tell you. Except," she added on second thought, "Plummer feels the same way. Maybe some other men. I don't know. I don't know that Plummer has ever said so, but he and Roy Ford are just like—that." Belle locked her fingers together, raised her hands breast-high, showing him.

The marshal announced: "When them cowboys start comin' up with cattle, it's goin' to take an experienced man to keep order! Yes, sir!"

Lathrop looked at her hands, seeming to study them before he asked:

"Did that gambler's trying to kill young Harringson tonight have anything to do with it?"

Belle shook her head, tried to meet his look, and at last said: "Not that I know of." Then she walked to the window and stood to one side, gazing out into the night. His continued silence was too much for her, and she turned her head. "I'm awfully tired."

"Let me be sure that I understand, Miss Belle." The tip of his fingers ran back and forth across his chin as he eyed a far corner of the room, absently. "Roy Ford and Plummer are developing Plummer City. They have stirred up big excitement. Lots and options going like hot cakes. From what I hear, all because the road is going through there. Is that the way of it?"

"Yes."

"If the road doesn't go there, they would be pretty much lurched, wouldn't they?"

"I'd think so!"

"They are counting on it. So if what you have told me is true, they are counting on General Harringson's losing control—just when, Miss Belle?"

"I do not know. I would have said, 'soon'—I mean that is the impression I had. But I can't be sure. Everybody else seems to think that the railroad fight is over. That General Harringson is in full control, and will succeed in keeping it."

"That," said Lathrop with a queer smile, "is what makes it a big gamble. We, you, the Doc, and I, have to be sure. The Doc seemed to think you *knew*. Please play fair, Miss Belle. There will be a lot of money to whack up between us if we guess right!"

Belle's tongue struck out at him. "Do you think for a minute that I'm fool enough to believe you would divide with me, or the Doc, if you made a cleanup? Yes, you've got me in a steel trap with that damn' box! But don't," she told him fiercely, really losing her temper, "think I'm fool enough to think you are going to play stocks or lots or something, then divide with *me*. Why should you? I know what sharpers are like, and you are one of them!"

Her angry words fed her temper, and it blazed higher, and she came up to him, defiantly. "And I'll tell you something else! I don't want to see the Harringsons lose the road! It doesn't mean anything to me—not in money. But I like Jack Harringson. And I like the General, from what I've heard of him. And I don't like Roy Ford. I don't like the kind of man he is. And I don't like *you!*"

Her haggard face flushed with a firelike beauty, and her dark eyes glistened at him, as she added recklessly:

"And I hope you lose every dollar you risk against the Harringsons!"

"I won't," he said, and smiled. "But now I understand why the old Doc thinks you are such a wonderful woman. I am beginning to think so myself. Good night, Miss Belle. Or rather, good morning!"

He threw up the hook of the locked door, faced around. "I won't bother your game, not in the least. So be at ease there." He opened the door and went out quietly.

AT three o'clock in the morning the Tip-Top was still noisy but not very gay. Musicians were tired; the girls were tired; the bartenders were tired; nearly everybody also was badly fuddled. A couple of black-jack dealers laid down cards for tired bleary men in four-bit games, and a cluster of poker-players slouched over a corner table, dumping the kitty every few hands for another round of drinks. Heavy-footed booted men lugged girls over the floor with awkward caperings they thought were dances. Once in a while some dozing drunk would stir, get to his feet and let out a war-whoop by way of announcing that he had come to life and was ready to go on with the fun.

The girl called Betty leaned over a table in the pretense of listening to a maundering mule-skinner who still had money in his pocket. Her feet ached; her head ached; and her heart felt as if the devil had his claws in it. She had drunk too much, and it hadn't helped a bit.

She really didn't feel surprised when a light hand touched her shoulder, and with a backward twist of neck she saw that Lathrop had come. It wasn't easy to speak, but she said: "Aw-all right, aw-aw-all right." She called huskily to a fat woman in short skirts and told the mule-skinner, who couldn't see straight anyhow: "Mamie, here, is my friend and she'll keep you company till I come back."

Mamie said, "Hi, boy!" gave him a slap, dropped into a chair. "Let's have a little drink. What say, honey?"

For the first time in many years Betty blushed. Lathrop had found her here, in a place like this, with people like these, and she could read what he was thinking, or thought that she could. He had every reason to hate her, and probably did; and in a way was probably glad that she was down about as low as they go. He hadn't changed much in seven or eight years. The boyishness had gone but the cast of his face was the same, except that it had hardened.

He tossed a dollar into the musicians' kettle, swung her out onto the floor. She wanted to bawl, remembering other dances, years gone. When they crossed the floor, he took her to a table. A sloppy man with loose suspenders and a soiled cloth tucked in the front of his trousers for an apron straggled up to take the order for drinks. The moment a gent sat down with a lady, he had to buy drinks.

"Whisky," said Betty, and Lathrop said, "Whisky," and the waiter said, "Whisky, huh," and shambled off.

She tried not to look at him while he was looking at her, but she couldn't keep her eyes down. She wondered that he could even recognize her. He didn't seem angry, and there was no rasp in his voice; but she had the feeling that he was looking at her from a mile away.

"You have changed, Betty. I don't think I'd have known you if it hadn't shown in your face that you knew me."

The whiskies came, the sloppy waiter grunted in surprised thanks at his tip, and shuffled off.

"You won't believe anything I tell you, will you?" she asked, pleading.

"Not a thing," he said, somehow without sounding unkind. "You were one of the beautiful girls of Louisville. I was a spy. You were supposed to be my friend. The only thing I don't know is how much they paid you for catching me. I have always wondered, Betty."

"I never was paid a dollar. Honest to God!"

"That was because I got away, wasn't it?"

"Oh, why do you have to—why didn't you leave me be? You saw where I was! You saw what I am! Isn't that enough? What more do you want? I haven't been happy—not for a day or a night—since!" She looked aside. "I don't suppose you'll believe, that, either."

With the look as if from a mile away, he watched the blowsy girl who had once made him think of peach-bloom and apple blossoms. The murkiness of dim lamps and tobacco-smoke did not conceal the wretched things that the past few years had done to her. Her fingers twitched at the glass of whisky. "You hate me," she said dully.

"The war is over."

She considered that, trying to find something hopeful, but it was no use. He had said it in much the same way that he might have read it from a history book; and if he did not seemed pleased that she had been made to suffer, she could not feel that he had the least pity.

Then she heard him say: "You don't belong in a place like this, even yet."

"What do you mean—" Betty had almost spoken his name but he moved a hand and checked her.

"Where would you go, and what would you do, if you could?"

She gazed blankly. "Away from *here?*"

"Yes."

"I have no home—no friends, no place to go. Where could I go?"

"Wherever you say."

"You mean—oh!" A look of hope came to her face and went away. "You wouldn't do anything to—to help me—now!" Then her voice trembled with an eager, "Would you?" His head scarcely moved, but enough to assure her. She gasped: "It's like a dream—only in dreams, I've been afraid of you. I didn't think you'd ever forgive—me."

"I haven't."

"But—" She stopped, questioningly.

"Yes. But there is no forgiveness in it. Where would you like to go?"

"I could go back to Kansas City. Or St. Louis. There are people there I know."

"Let us say, St. Louis, then. And a train leaves here at six o'clock."

"*This* morning?"

"Tomorrow morning I may not feel the same about you. I won a little at cards tonight. May lose tomorrow. And if there is time for me to think it over, and remember that you were coaxing me to talk of love when the soldiers you had called beat on the door and—"

"Don't! *Don't!*" she begged, with her hands to her ears and her head down. "Oh, God, don't!"

He stopped and watched her. When she looked up, tears were dribbling down the sides of her nose, and she dabbed at her face, and told him brokenly, in an unsure voice, as if afraid to tell him: "I'll go—b-but I owe—owe fifteen or twenty dollars here. They won't let me go until—"

"Go get ready. Pack what you have. I'll wait. See you to the train. Settle what you owe here. I'll give you the ticket and a hundred dollars!"

That morning there were few people about the depot. Outgoing trains did not interest Fenton City. It was a cool morning with a look of rain low in the sky. Betty sat with her hands in her lap and face lowered, patiently. Lathrop looked at her tawdry shabbiness, and the sin-scarred marks on her face that showed up in the daylight. If he had wished evil upon her, he could not have wished for more than had befallen the gay and pretty girl that so many men, both of the Northern and Southern armies, had flirted with in Louisville.

The train came up and paused with clanging toll of bell and hiss of steam. He took up her carpet-bag and small battered valise, went with her into the coach, picked out a seat. He took off his hat. "Good-by, Betty."

She lifted a gloved hand, trying to smile. The black glove was frayed and ripped at the seams. The smile twisted into the tortured look of coming tears. He touched her hand, dropped it and went away. She bent her head to her handkerchief and sobbed.

The train moved away, with Lathrop watching it dwindle on the narrowing tracks. His mouth looked a bit grim, though there was the quirk of a smile in a corner, and he drew a long breath, relieved. From the first glimpse of her face in the shadowing murk of the Tip-Top, he had known he would have to do something to get her out of town, far away, and at once. It had worked. If she had made any close guess as to why he wanted her to leave, she would have sunk her claws into him and hung on.

Chapter Seven

LATHROP went back uptown, thinking of breakfast and bed. Wagons were creaking in the street, with now and then the firecracker snap of a line's end whipped out by some teamster who could pick a fly off a mule's rump. Men stood on the sidewalk's edge, looking up. They told passing strangers, "Looks like rain." Strangers replied, "Sure do." Fellows that had not been to bed seemed blearily wondering what to do now. Eating-places were busy. Far off, on the corral siding, an engine was screaming, probably swearing in its way at a switchman.

Lathrop stopped at the Empire for a breakfast drink. Two bartenders had come on duty and were not very busy. A half-dozen men were bellied up as if not yet quite awake, and others lounged against the doorway at the end of the room. One chuckled:

"Seen old Pop McVey's paper, Pete?"

"What's he say, huh?"

"Get you one and read it. Takes the hide off old Simpson. Yeah!"

"Pop better look out. Some day somebody'll—"

Lathrop stood apart from the men at the bar, watching the bartender make a whisky sour. "Is there a man named Blade, Will Blade, I think, staying here at the hotel?"

The bartender paused, studied. "Not as I recall. Mr. Taggart would know. He's not up yet." Then: "Morning, Jack."

"Morning," young Harringson said, and came up to Lathrop's side. "I've been waiting hours to find you."

"Have a drink?"

"No." Then, apologetically: "I mean, I don't want it. I mean, I'm—some fellows get mad if you don't take a drink." Harringson looked tired, troubled, and words were bothering him. "I wanted to thank you for last night. I wanted to find you. You saved my bacon last night."

"I did, yes."

The burly young man grinned wearily. "I'm glad you say it like that. Most fellows would say, 'Oh, it wasn't anything,' and want me to argue with them that it was." He studied the label on a bottle behind the bar. "I've got to talk to somebody." He paused, looked at Lathrop.

"All right, we'll talk. Have you had breakfast?"

"I don't want to eat. You go ahead. My belly feels as if I'd swallowed a rock."

"Where'll we go? I haven't much of a room."

"I hadn't thought about it. You can come over to the bunkhouse with me. Nobody'll be there. I'm not supposed to be there myself, I guess. I'm not sure whether I got

fired or whether I quit. Only, I've changed my mind about going away."

The bartender reached for the empty glass, and remembering Lathrop's inquiry, he turned and called to the other bartender. "Uh—Henry, you know anybody by the name of Blade? Will Blade?" Henry finished wiping a glass, shook his head. "No—don't."

"Blade?" said Harringson. "*Colonel* Blade?"

"He may be a 'Colonel.' I wouldn't know," Lathrop replied, and waited to hear something more.

"If it's the Blade I'm thinking of, he would have been called Colonel. What did you hear about him?"

"This morning I happened to be down at the depot. And," Lathrop went on, easily and untruthfully, "I overheard a couple of men talking. One of them said that he had heard Will Blade was in town—or maybe coming to town. I wasn't interested until the other one said: 'He'll tell Senator Fenton what to believe and what to do' So I wondered a little."

"*That* can't be anybody but Colonel Blade! The General's sent him out. If he's in town, I'd like to find him. Who were the men you heard talking? Must have been from the company office. Do you know?"

"No, I don't. What about this Blade?"

Harringson with a perplexed grin shook his head. "*You* ought to know as much about that as most people! You were Southern, you said."

"That's right."

"Colonel Blade was the General's chief scout and bottle-washer. I wasn't old enough to be in the army. The General never talked much, but once I was reading something or other about his campaigns—some book that made him snort. It was full of gallant charges, flag-waving and all that, with one of those pictures—the General was on a big horse with his hat on his sword—something like that. He told me not to believe that kind of rubbish. He said campaigns were won sitting at a table miles away from the battle." Harringson looked pleased as he talked, but the words came thoughtfully. "He said the commander made use of information brought to him by men the history books never heard of. He said he knew, for instance, that anything Colonel Blade told him, he could count on; and he did. He said when he wanted to find out something, he told Colonel Blade to find out. Maybe that is why Blade is out here now. I'd like to find him! The General said more than once he did what Colonel Blade advised when the whole damn' staff said don't do it. When Blade couldn't find out any other way, he'd raid behind the enemy lines and see for himself. That's why I'd think maybe you heard of him."

"Perhaps," Lathrop suggested without approval or disapproval, "much of the gentleman's success was because he didn't let us know that he was the fellow who was doing all that."

"I don't know. But I know I would sure like to talk to ***him***. I wonder," Harringson added in a tired far-off way, "if he would be as good at learning things about railroading? If he's in town, I've got to find him!"

"We can ask around. Sure you don't want a drink? And a little breakfast?"

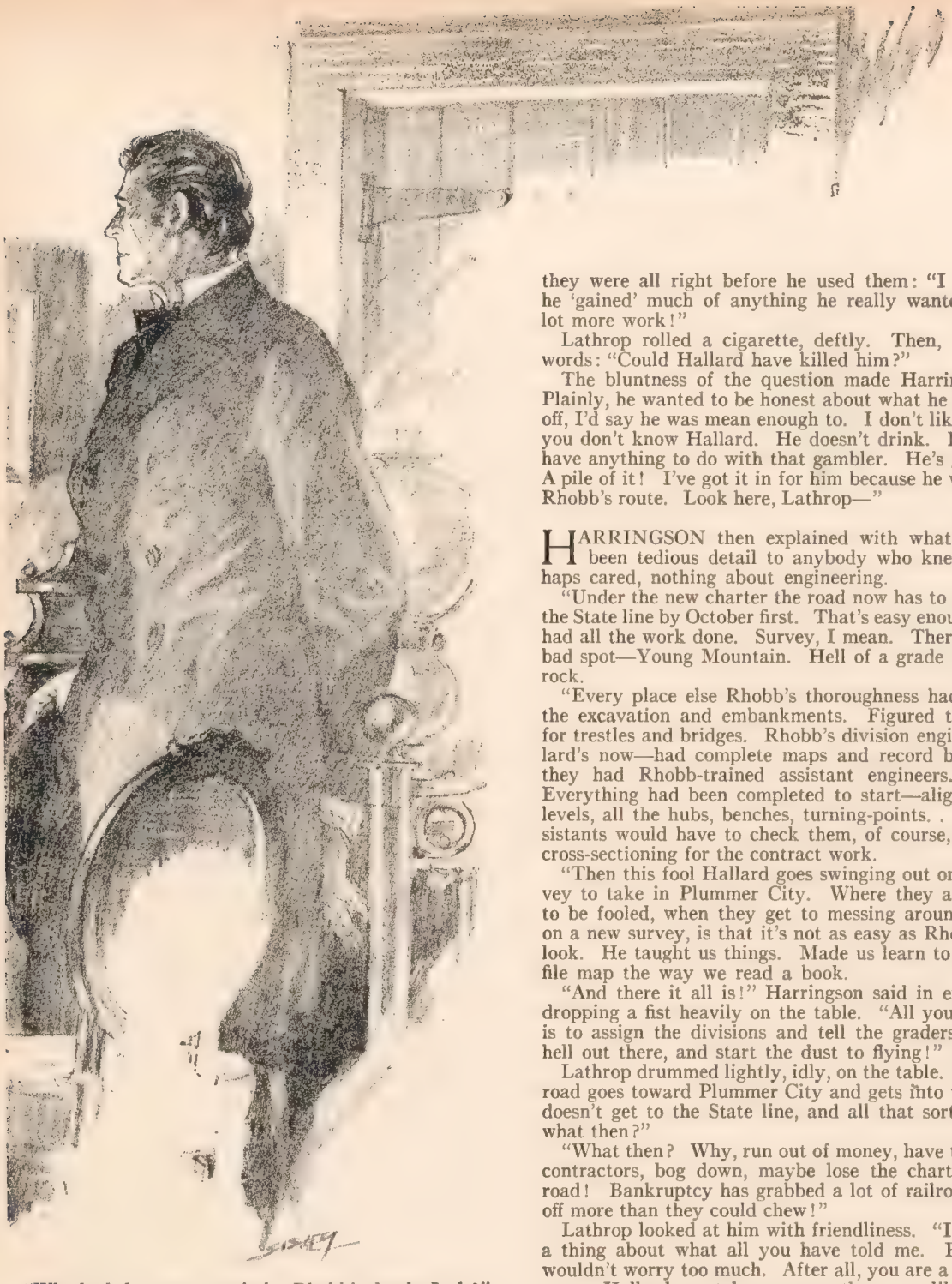
Harringson considered it. "Believe I do. . . . It has to be Colonel Blade, and the General has told Senator Fenton to believe whatever Blade tells him. Now I can't leave town. Changed my mind, anyhow."

THEY sat in the empty bunkhouse and young Harringson talked at length. He told Lathrop what Belle had said, mentioning Rhobb's name.

"I want to make her tell me more."

Lathrop agreed, but he thought that this big young frankly honest man would have a hard time making the supple evasive Belle admit anything she didn't want to admit. It would be like her to hide behind the statement that she merely *guessed* that Rhobb had been murdered.

Belle's face froze in a look that went over the reflection of her shoulder. . . . Lathrop was standing in a shadowed corner. He said: "I came and waited."



"Who had the most to gain by Rhobb's death, Jack?"

Harringson shook his head wearily.

"Gain? Nobody, that I know of. The Ganford outfit, maybe. But they wouldn't just shoot a man in the back. I had a feeling right from the first that King Collins *might* have had a hand in it. I never liked him, but we never had words. Yet he meant to shoot me, didn't he? The only man that really what you might called 'gained' anything was Hallard." Harringson explained with a troubled mumble, as if turning the words over slowly to make sure they were all right before he used them: "I don't think he 'gained' much of anything he really wanted. Only a lot more work!"

Lathrop rolled a cigarette, deftly. Then, in so many words: "Could Hallard have killed him?"

The bluntness of the question made Harringson stare. Plainly, he wanted to be honest about what he said: "First off, I'd say he was mean enough to. I don't like him. But you don't know Hallard. He doesn't drink. He wouldn't have anything to do with that gambler. He's got religion. A pile of it! I've got it in for him because he won't follow Rhobb's route. Look here, Lathrop—"

HARRINGSON then explained with what must have been tedious detail to anybody who knew, and perhaps cared, nothing about engineering.

"Under the new charter the road now has to get down to the State line by October first. That's easy enough. Rhobb had all the work done. Survey, I mean. There's only one bad spot—Young Mountain. Hell of a grade there—solid rock.

"Every place else Rhobb's thoroughness had calculated the excavation and embankments. Figured the masonry for trestles and bridges. Rhobb's division engineers—Hallard's now—had complete maps and record books. Also they had Rhobb-trained assistant engineers. I'm one. Everything had been completed to start—alignments and levels, all the hubs, benches, turning-points. . . . The assistants would have to check them, of course, and do the cross-sectioning for the contract work.

"Then this fool Hallard goes swinging out on a new survey to take in Plummer City. Where they are all goin. to be fooled, when they get to messing around out there on a new survey, is that it's not as easy as Rhobb made it look. He taught us things. Made us learn to read a profile map the way we read a book.

"And there it all is!" Harringson said in exasperation, dropping a fist heavily on the table. "All you have to do is to assign the divisions and tell the graders to get the hell out there, and start the dust to flying!"

Lathrop drummed lightly, idly, on the table. "And if the road goes toward Plummer City and gets into trouble, and doesn't get to the State line, and all that sort of thing—what then?"

"What then? Why, run out of money, have trouble with contractors, bog down, maybe lose the charter, lose the road! Bankruptcy has grabbed a lot of railroads that bit off more than they could chew!"

Lathrop looked at him with friendliness. "I don't know a thing about what all you have told me. But I really wouldn't worry too much. After all, you are a *young* engineer. Hallard must know more than you like to admit. And he has the advice of Rhobb's assistants. The General, too, always seems to know pretty well what he is doing.

"But I do think," Lathrop continued with an earnestness that was compelling, "you are doing right to stay in town, even though you are not working for the road. Even Hallard will probably want to give you a chance later. This thing of Rhobb's death ought to be looked into. And you watch out for yourself! In a way, we'll both have to watch out. That gambler is as mean as a hurt snake.

We'll know more about what to think of him when we find out if he has friends, and who they are. . . . Roll in over there and get some sleep. And stay out of dark places!"

Harringson gouged at a sleepy eye with a knuckle, shook his head to clear away the weariness. "Maybe I've talked too much. But I think you're an all-right fellow. I hope you bring up lots of cattle. The road needs the freight. . . . 'By! I know there is something wrong somewhere, but I still can't think why he wanted to shoot me."

Outside, Lathrop looked at his watch, but he had forgotten about bed. He had to find some place for a bath and a shave, and might keep going for another twenty-four hours. He walked uptown, studying over what he knew, planning what next to try to find out. Harringson was a young engineer, but he might be right, though Hallard could not be a fool, and he had good engineers to advise him. The scheme to reach out for Plummer City had to be feasible, or more engineers than young Harringson would have protested. The General himself had approved.

Perhaps Rhobb had been murdered. Apparently he met his death from a wild shot during a gun-fight between King Collins and some half-drunken quarrelsome Texan. "Apparently?" Ganford agents could have planned it, or any disgruntled revengeful workman. "Like Rhobb!" Belle had said in warning young Harringson to go away. Maybe she really knew; perhaps she merely suspected. . . .

It was near noon, and the Empire was filled. Men seemed excited. Lathrop edged into the background and looked on. It did not take him long to perceive that the crowd—at least the leaders—were having fun with the town's whisky-bloated mayor.

"An' lookee here, Mayor. You jest can't stand for a thing like that there piece in the paper. You gotta buckle yourself on some guns an' go down there an' run that ol' Irishman out o' town."

Voices chimed in with: "You sure have, Mayor! . . . Can't hold your head up if you don't! . . . You gotta run him out or git yourself!"

Ned Patton eased up close to Lathrop and spoke in an amused drawl. "The mayor can think of lots of things he'd like to do quicker 'n try to run the McVeys out of town."

Lathrop looked at him and didn't quite smile, but without unfriendliness said: "I guessed it."

Ned Patton's drowsy eyelids flickered. "You're a pretty good guesser, Mister." A smile wandered around over Patton's mouth. "King Collins is going to stay in his hole and lick his wounds like a lone wolf that found him a grizzly bear." He stopped; evidently he expected Lathrop to say something.

Lathrop did; after a pause, he said: "Interesting. Anything more?"

"In a way. Mostly I try to keep my mouth shut. It's safer. But I'll risk openin' it enough to remark that the King is a damn' sight more dangerous than maybe you figger." And having said that, Patton again took an interest in the crowd's talk, rose to his tiptoes and looked toward the bar. "Roy Ford is going to make him a little speech now!"

The dark-faced handsome man stood on a chair, moved out his arms, asking for silence. Men called to him, and some clapped. White teeth brightened his pleased smile, and he removed his wide hat, acknowledging the reception.

"Now, gentlemen," Mr Ford began, "we all honor and want to honor our mayor."

That brought hurrahs and whoops.

Lathrop watchfully studied Roy Ford, and knew that he was a man of ability, even culture. Full-bodied, full-blooded, hot-blooded. He spoke well, easily, with a persuasive earnestness that had ironical exaggerations. Ford was enjoying himself.

"In this country, gentlemen, each man must defend his own honor! He dare not conceal himself behind his lofty title. We chose our mayor to represent our city, as a man of courage, integrity, sobriety—"

"Sobriety" brought out such a rattle of applause that Ford paused, and somebody started the call for a speech from the mayor himself.

"Give him a chair! Speech! Speech!"

Ford gave way to the clamor, stepped down from the chair, and without joining in nevertheless lent his interest to the fellows who pulled and pushed at Mayor Simpson.

Lathrop leaned closer to Ned Patton, asked: "Is this just a joke?"

"Joke, hell!" Patton replied. "Fellows makin' the most noise up there don't know it—'cept maybe Roy Ford and Taggart—but old Simpson is goin' to get himself run out of town. If he don't go down to McVey's, he'll be guyed till he lights out. If he does, he will too! They got it rigged to whipsaw him."

"Good riddance?" Lathrop suggested.

"I s'pose. Noisy old coot. Bellers like a bull-calf."

Mayor Simpson, lifted to the chair, boasted angrily: "I'll show you! Nobody can say things like this about me—" Cheers and claps broke in on him. "That measly ol' Irishman's wrote things about other fellows, but when he dares to call *me*—" The mayor warmed up to his speech; an encouraging clamor went up for him to make good his boasts.

He was lifted from the chair, given a drink of whisky, pushed into the lead of a group of men that started off through the town toward the boxcar print-shop. Heading the procession gave him a swagger.

"Comin'?" Ned Patton asked.

Lathrop saw that less than half the men were interested enough to go along. Ford remained at the bar, laughing. Taggart rubbed his hands and grinned. Lathrop felt no particular curiosity to see what would happen when Mayor Simpson came face to face with the editor. He was more interested in Roy Ford. "What will there be to see?"

"Old Pop'll either be drunk or he'll be sober. No half way about him," said Patton, slow and amused. "Get 'im mad, and he's likely to start in and take off a lot of scalps."

The boxcar was about a hundred yards from the edge of town. As the mayor's group went along the street, other men fell into the straggling crowd. Some explained with the shout: "He's goin' to run McVey out o' town!" The reply was mostly hoots and laughter. Simpson still shook the newspaper in his fist, talked big and took long steps.

Chapter Eight

DOC BARON had gone to the boxcar to make arrangements about labels. This morning, even without the overcast sky, the world seemed dreary. Belle's sleeplessness had got her up early—that is, early for her; and her knuckles had aroused the Doc from his heavy sleep. She gave him the devil for having, as she called it, betrayed her confidence; and she did what she could to make him dread what she would do if he told that Lathrop, or anybody, that King Collins was her husband. There was a good deal of shame hidden behind Belle's arguments as to why nobody must know that. "Ruin my game," she said, knowing, too, that it would ruin men's fine opinion of her.

"One word from me, you old cutthroat, and Berny'll throw you out on the street!" Leaving, she gave the door a slam that seemed to promise that Berny Taggart would hear that word.

So the Doc, whose funds were low, thought it best to make his pharmaceutical arrangements, have labels printed, begin collecting bottles, and compound his secret.

He went to the boxcar, and the burlap curtains parted. A pretty girl looked out. She was about sixteen, blue-eyed, red-headed, barefooted, with a quite impish friendliness, not overbold at all, but frank and used to men. She didn't know what fear was; for the graders, the track-layers, the railroaders, all a hard and maybe bad lot in their way, would have killed any man that taught her.

"Oh, good morning, sir!" she said to Doc Baron with smiling interest.

He was a big man, a very big man, with high broad shoulders, a long frock coat, a wide hat, and she didn't notice his shabbiness, for shabbiness did not seem to her important. She liked the benign dignity of his massive face, and off came his hat with a sweep and a bow. His voice had a pleasing rumble.

"I trust, young lady, that I have not made a mistake in followin' what I thought was the directions to the print-shop?"

"Indeed you haven't!" said Molly; and with a backward glance, she came through the burlap and sat on the top of the rickety steps. "You want a printing job?"

The Doc heard something very like the sawing of a gourd, which he recognized as snores; when Molly saw his listening look, she explained: "Pop is asleep. He worked late last night. But anything you want, sir, I can tell you the cost and"—she held out her ink-grimed fingers—"set it up, too!"

It had been a long time since Doc Baron met an attractive person who listened with interest and encouraged him to talk of his travels; so, before the matter of labels was settled, he was telling her of New York and Chicago, and of New Orleans. He used many big words, and he mis-pronounced some of them, with sometimes a mistake in grammar; but that wouldn't have troubled Molly even if she had noticed. She had never seen anybody, not even a preacher, who talked as entertainingly.

She noticed the crowd defiling from the town with the men in the lead making straight for the boxcar. Her sharp eyes recognized Mayor Simpson.

"There seems to be rather a large assemblage ap-proachin'," said the Doc, inquiringly.

"Oh, and they'll want to see Pop, and they can't! And the Mayor's going to be mad as a hornet! Did you see the paper? No? I'll get you one!"

Molly darted into the boxcar and came out with an unfolded one-sheet newspaper, pointed a finger at a column, then sat down again on the top steps and tucked the gingham about her ankles. Doc Baron skimmed the column. He knew fighting words when he saw them in a newspaper, and calmly folding the paper and thrusting it into a pocket up under his long coat, he inquired:

"Do you anticipate any annoyance?"

"No. No, I don't think so. They wouldn't hurt *me,* and I won't let them see Pop. That mayor's mad, and you can't blame him—but you can't blame Pop, either! Oh, Lord!" Molly exclaimed with a bit of a fright as she saw that Mayor Simpson was wearing a revolver buckled on before him. "He's got a gun!"

"Eh?" said Doc, putting on his hat and squinting, the better to see. "So he has. So he has. But have no fear. In so large a group, there must be many gentlemen who won't let 'im be violent!"

He moved back somewhat to one side of the car as Mayor Simpson stalked up, flanked by friends—or so he thought—who paused a step or so behind, leaving him in the front.

"Where," Simpson shouted in the voice that Ned Patton had called like a bull-calf's, "is that damn' lyin' editor!"

"Pop's tired and resting. He can't be disturbed," said Molly right back at him.

"He's hidin', that's what! He's afraid of me!" Simpson bellowed.

"Afraid of—*you?*" Molly asked with a squeal that was half laughter. "Oh, so *that's* why Pop didn't print what he really thought of you!"

Men laughed, and some words plopped at the mayor's ears that let him know the audience thought Molly had scored. He puffed his cheeks, looked as if trying to explode, flung up his hand, shook the crumpled paper, roared: "Him or me's got to git out of town!" He had heard that from Roy Ford, from Taggart, from other men who had bucked him up to make the show-down.

"Oh, now, now, Ted Simpson, if you will just tell me what it is that has made you so mad, I'll explain to Pop when he wakes up!"

"I want to see him my own self! Right now! *'Baboon,'* he called me! *'Baboon!'* Says I 'scaped from Barnum's circus after a train-wreck an'—"

"But," Molly asked in her quick way, giving the curly hair a backward sweep of fingers, "did you ever see a baboon. Ted Simpson? I don't believe you did! So for all you know, Pop may have meant it as a compliment!"

The listening men cackled, and some whooped at Simpson, and the kind of rage that blinds even men of good sense made him furious. He roared: "By God, I'm goin' in there an'—" He lurched forward, too quick for the snatching reach of men close behind, clapped a hand on the gun, and was almost at the foot of the rickety steps.

MOLLY, frightened, stood with a determined grasp on the burlap curtains. She would not let him get in to Pop without knocking her aside. Throughout the crowd the more quick-witted men had moved, and shouts told Simpson to stop. Big arms moved like a swimmer's breast-stroke, and the Doc towered massively at the foot of the rickety steps. Ted Simpson went back on his heels and glared in surprise. "Who the hell are you?"

"Dr. Baron, sir. Dr. Leroy Baron, of New Orleans, sir!" The words were rolled out in a deep voice, and the Doc calmly pushed aside the front of his frock coat and hooked his thumbs inside of his waistband—one hand very close to the long heavy knife in the black sheath. "And in case you never heard of me, sir, this is a fittin' time to make my acquaintance!" The Doc, medicine man, street-corner spouter, barn-stormer, knew crowds and how to win them. He also knew men, and told Simpson: "In my presence, remove your hand from that gun, sir, or—"

By way of completing the *"or,"* the Doc half drew the two-pound knife from its sheath, but let go as the confused Simpson dropped his arms. The Doc knew when he had winning cards, and with solemn gravity he told Simpson: "I have read the article in question, and I wish to inquire, sir, just what statement you complain of?"

Men hung forward with tense delighted interest.

"Speak up, sir! Speak up!" said the Doc, looking and sounding as if giving an order in court. *"Speak up!"*

Simpson waggled his jaws before words came, and the words were blurted with a complaining whimper. "Says I stole gold out 'o my dead grandmother's teeth! That's just a crazy lie to make folks laugh, an'—"

"Well, sir," said the Doc solemnly, "if that is an error, no doubt the editor'll gladly print a correction, providin', sir—providin' you tell the gentlemen present, and the young lady here, whose grandmother's teeth it was!"

Men broke loose at that, guffawed and whooped. The lanky cavalrymen slapped their dusty legs. Molly let out a joyous squeak. Fellows shouted, "Ho-ho-ho-ho!" and stabbed their fingers at Simpson's ribs.

Ned Patton murmured through a lazy smile: "Now aint you glad you come?"

Lathrop, amused and mystified, said: "Yes." He wondered just how much of a fraud that old Doc was, for after all, the man he had made fun of did wear a gun.

Simpson tried to get away, but men followed, laughing.

As a strong puff of wind swept a misty drizzle from the low clouds, and the drizzle thickened rapidly to rain, they hurried for the town, but in their hurry many kept close to the Doc, as if proud to be with him.

Ned Patton and Lathrop hurried back side by side, and Patton said: "See now? I reckon it worked better'n Tag-art an' them had planned. Old Simpson'll be guyed till he has to get out."

"But even cowards shoot!"

"Yeah. You bet. Mostly *is* cowards that shoot. But that gun on Simpson aint loaded. He didn't know it. But neither did that old Doc!"

Up went Taggart's voice: "Cohen, I want you to fit out my friend here—Dr. Baron. He's maybe going to be the next mayor!"

"And how do you know?"

"My gun. Taggart borrowed her. The shells are in my pocket."

"Wasn't that a pretty dangerous play—give a man an empty gun and send him into a quarrel?" Lathrop's tone was critical.

"Yep," Ned Patton said indifferently. "But Pop McVey don't even own a gun. He'd look one right in the eye an' spit at it! Taggart an' them sort of hoped Simpson would draw—and if he tried to shoot—shoot unarmed old Pop—why, fellows would have tarred and feathered him, and rode him out on a rail!"

Lathrop said coolly, but with a cutting edge: "I didn't see anybody heating tar and looking for feather pillows last night when that gambler tried to shoot young Jack Harringson!"

Ned Patton stopped, though the rain was coming hard now, and he grinned at Lathrop with a sleepy slowness. "Makes a lot of diff'rence who's your friends in this town, Mister. Simpson, he aint got any." He moved a hand and shook his head as Lathrop began a question. "Don't ask me nothin'. I've maybe already talked too much. I'm a card-sharp myself. And so are you. I figger you're better than I am, an' I like to keep friendly with better men than I am. But I sort of keep things to myself about folks that *used* to be my friends. So if I was you, I'd set with my chair-back to the wall. When I walked, I'd look both ways. After dark I wouldn't do much walkin'!"

THE afternoon turned into windy rain, that fell at times as if dropped by the bucketfuls out of heaven, and came in sheets from the slanting porch tops into the dusty street, making mud Wagons kept moving; teamsters. many without slickers, hunched on their seats, sopping wet, with a look of dreary patience. Men huddled under the porches, or peered from doorways, watching the plop and sizzle of rain with stolid fascination. In crowded places the damp sweaty clothing gave off a steamy smell, strong with tobacco and whisky. Wet men drank whisky, often hot whisky, to keep out the chill.

Hallard's chief clerk, Ayers, slithered in out of the wet with water streaming from a long raincoat and shook his hat in the Empire entrance. His bald head looked like the oblong side of an egg and his head hung forward on his neck as if stretched that way from much peering down at papers.

He went into the barroom, stepping lightly. A man, probably in the hope of getting news, inviting him up for a drink. Ayers said, "Oh, no, no," with a deprecating smile as if he thought liquor was poison. He asked for Mr Taggart, and a bartender told the sweeper-up to take word to Taggart. Somebody asked Ayers what was new, and he smiled secretively but said: "Why, nothing, nothing, sir."

The sweeper-up returned and told him that Mr. Taggart had said to come up. When Ayers left, Roy Ford gave his glass a stir, making what was left of the liquor swirl about, jerked his head toward the door "There's a bad smell that lingers, even after he's gone!"

Ayers tapped at King Collins' door, and Taggart opened the door. A sharp look with the edge of suspicion in it glanced over Taggart's pointed nose, but his voice had a strained welcome: "Come in, Ayers. Come in."

Ayers' look slid past Taggart, lingered on the gambler's face. There was a queer inflection in his "How do you do, Mr. Collins?"

King Collins stood with his coat off, wearing a fresh white shirt, and his right arm was in a black silk sling. "Sit down, Mr. Ayers," said the King. pointing with his left hand, and his cold lips smiled.

"Thank you, Mr. Collins." Ayers slipped from his wet coat, laid coat and hat on the floor, then sat down.

"You wanted to see me?" Taggart asked, his voice still strained to friendliness, but his fingers rubbed at the handkerchief he held in front of him.

"Yes. Yes," said Ayers, "Senator Fenton is coming in on No. 5. It will be late. This storm, hours late. Mr.

Hallard wants to know if you can make accommodations for the Senator and his daughter."

Taggart, relieved, beamed. "I've already planned it, Ayers. Tell Hallard I've arranged to give 'em three rooms, adjoinin'. Had carpenters cut a door through today; we're all prepared to give the Senator the very best! Yes, sir-ree! Anything else, Ayers?"

"Nothing. Nothing, Mr. Taggart." Pause. "Except—another pause—"we today received a telegram from Colonel Blade in St. Louis. He has been delayed." And Ayers' loose lips smiled with curious meaning.

"'Blade? Blade? Colonel Blade?' Two or three people have asked about him today. Who the devil is he, Ayers?"

Ayers glanced at King Collins, whose face was also waxenly blank, then he said with almost whispering words: "Colonel Blade is the gentleman General Harringson is sending out to investigate and report on—" for a long moment Ayers left the sentence hanging in thin air—*"conditions!"*

"Oh," said Taggart heavily, with understanding. He looked at King Collins; then both looked Ayers, and Ayers smiled but not reassuringly.

King Collins left-handedly poured a drink for himself. Taggart turned to the window and watched the rain. Ayers sat with eyes lifted as though studying the ceiling; and his eyes were still overhead as he inquired:

"You have met with an accident, Mr. Collins?"

The King explained in a slow precise voice that a man, with no warning at all, had caught his arm and nearly broken it.

Ayers said: "Oh, yes, yes. We heard—heard that you had some misunderstanding with young Harringson and somebody interfered. Harringson is a very disgruntled young man. He will have much to say to Colonel Blade."

Taggart turned on his heel. "Who the hell *is* Blade?"

"I don't know, don't know. But it is Mr. Hallard's understanding that he was General Harringson's chief of scouts during the War. I must be on my way. Mr. Hallard will be pleased to know that you have made the suitable preparations. Senator Fenton is Mr. Hallard's best friend in the company."

Ayers put on his hat, wriggled into his coat, wished them good day, and went out noiselessly.

Taggart walked back and forth across the floor and chewed on a fresh cigar. "King, that damned Ayers has got a jinx on us! You feel it too, damn you—I know you do! He's smarter'n he looks, and that squiggly manner o' his—*ugh!* And there's nothing we can do about it—yet."

"Not *yet*," the gambler repeated with a look as if giving a promise about something or other in the future.

"Well, anyhow," said Taggart, pausing to light his cigar, and grinning, "we got rid of Simpson. The old Doc is still a big man! More left in him than I thought. Certainly made himself popular in this town!" Taggart jerked the cigar from his mouth, exclaimed: "He'll have even old McVey likin' him!" Taggart sharply snapped his fingers. "That gives me an idea. Listen, King—"

LATHROP had left the train without any baggage. He went into Cohen's store for underwear and a slicker. Though it was not yet night, lamps were burning. The heavy rain filled the store with the mustiness of damp woolens, the stronger odor of new leather.

Slickers hung like the skins of hair-stripped black animals in the rear. Lathrop was trying one on for size when three or four men came with hurrying lurch through the door, and stamped and shook themselves.

One was Doc Baron, dripping wet. Another was Mr. Taggart, well wrapped in a raincoat. Up went Taggart's voice: "Cohen, I want you to fit out my friend here. Dr. Baron—Dr. Leroy Baron. Got anything big enough? He's maybe going to be the next mayor, Cohen! Fit him out from head to heels, and I'll pay the bill. Just been talkin' to some of the boys, and they say: 'Why not have the trustees appoint Dr. Baron mayor?'"

The Doc took it all with pleased dignity, and Cohen lifted up his hands, one to each of the Doc's broad shoulders, making a guess at the measurement. "A big man, but I haf the coat for him. Ah, a fine frock coat."

IN the far corner Lathrop remained unnoticed until a clerk came. "You want this slicker?"

Lathrop paid eight dollars and wore the slicker. He made other purchases of shirts, underwear, socks; then, in leaving, passed close to the Doc.

"Congratulations, Doctor!" said Lathrop. "I was down at the boxcar today "

Taggart had been doing most of the talking, and turning to Lathrop, put out his hand. Men who had seen Lathrop slap the gambler had had much to say, and all favorable. "Ah, Mr. Lathrop! The Doc and I have been friends for twenty years—haven't we, Doc? And by the way, Senator Fenton arrives tonight. Oh, yes; and I heard—did you ask me about Colonel Blade? No, I remember. But you were asking about him. He hasn't arrived yet. Been delayed. Telegraphed from St. Louis. And Roy Ford wants to meet you, Mr. Lathrop. He has heard about—um—last night. Here, meet—"

Taggart introduced him to one or two other men.

Lathrop went through the door, pulled hard to close it against the wind, walked head-down to the hardware store. He bought a razor, strap and soap under the eyes of idlers who sat on the counter and talked:

"Don't think the damn' road ever will be built—I heard Winch Wilson say . . I been chased by Injuns all over that so-called Plummer City country. Buff'lo a-plenty. . . . I can't figger why they think Plummer'll be bigger 'n any other end-of-track town."

Lathrop went out again into the storm. The wind was strong, the rain heavy, the street ran water over the gummy mud, but men splashed across. In the distance a wagon-train, mostly of oxen, was heading out with slow laborious plod. Rain, shine or wind, the freighters moved when their wagons were loaded—twenty and thirty wagons in a train, six or eight mules and oxen in a team, two men to a wagon and team. The railroads would take all that upon its own iron tracks, eventually.

He went to his room, which was upstairs at a corner over a saloon, a small and nearly bare room, with a wash-basin for a bowl, a bucket for a pitcher. The partitions were thin pine, and some previous occupant, interested in privacy, had pasted scraps of newspaper over the two or three knot-holes. The bed had broken slats, and a cornhusk mattress covered with rough blankets. The looking-glass was a piece from a shattered mirror held to the partition by three or four shingle-nails driven in at an angle. The door had a light bolt-lock; but Lathrop had a small block of wood and whittled one side of it down to a sharp edge. When that was wedged in under the door it would hold fast, no matter if somebody did cleverly slip the bolt.

He removed his coat and shirt, shaved in cold water with the readiness of one who had done it many times. A soft buckskin belt was about his waist, weighted with gold-pieces. He drew out a few for the evening's needs, took as good an all-over wash as he could from the basin, and dressed. By that time it was almost night. He lighted the candle, and seated on the bed with a tablet on his knee, he began to write, in a small clear hand.

The opening sentence was: *"I have heard, but am not yet convinced, that men who are in a position to know what they are doing, are betting their fortunes that the Harringson group will soon lose control."* In the middle of the letter: *"There is the possibility that Chief Engineer Rhobb's death was not accidental."* In conclusion: *"I do not trust the telegraph operators, who may disclose my messages to interested persons, but will keep you informed by letter. The moment I am convinced that there is a plot to seize control of the road, I shall do any- and everything to take advantage of the situation."*

Lathrop addressed an envelope, stamped it, put on his slicker, blew out the candle. There was a key in the door, but since much the same kind of key was in every other door, he did not trouble himself to take it out and turn the lock on the outside.

The post office was at the front of a grocery store. Lathrop bought more stamps from the bespectacled man who counted them out with tap of finger on each stamp, and so did not notice when Lathrop slipped his envelope through the letter slot.

Lathrop made his way half-blindly toward the print-shop boxcar. He found it by a crack of light through the nearly closed door. From the ground, he reached up and knocked.

"Who on earth is it?" Molly asked, her face to the crack.

"My name is Lathrop. I would like to talk with Mr. McVey."

"Mr. Lathrop?" Her lively voice was interested. Lathrop could hear her lowered tone. "It's that Mr. Lathrop, Pop. The one they say slapped King Collins!"

The boxcar door was shoved back. The wind rushed at the burlap. Molly said, "Be careful of the steps!"

He was careful, coming up in a crouch with his hands helping as if on a ladder; and when he stood inside, Molly ran the door back on its rollers, leaving only a crack through which the wind hissed gustily.

The car had a stove, a homemade cupboard for dishes, a small table with a flap-leaf, all at one end. Then there were type-cases, an imposing-stone, and small hand press in the center, with a shaded lantern overheard, but looped on a wire so that it could be moved to where light was needed. At the other end were bunks with burlap curtains on wires, giving privacy when drawn.

Pop sat on a corner of a bunk, his elbows on his knees, a tin cup of hot black coffee in his hand. His eyes looked hot, tired, dull. When he stood up to greet Lathrop, he was small and thin, and the Irish-soft voice was husky.

Lathrop said straight off that he was a "cattle-man," had come to Fenton City to see about shipments; but being here, finding lots of business excitement and hearing of projects, he might be said in a way to be getting the fever. He had the funds for a small investment, could arrange for more and felt that the printer as well, or better, than anybody else—"anybody who would talk freely to a stranger," —might be able to give him advice.

"For which," said Lathrop, "I wish, of course, to pay. Just as I would pay a lawyer or a doctor."

Pop sat down and rubbed a small inky hand over his aching head. Molly took his cup. "Let me give you some more, hot." Halfway to the stove, Molly turned to ask: "Do you know Dr. Baron? Did you hear what he did today? They say old Ted Simpson isn't mayor any more!"

"And there is some talk of Dr. Baron being elected, or appointed—I don't know how civic matters are arranged here—mayor."

Molly squeaked with delight. "Hear that, Pop? I told you! He's a wonderful man!" She tipped the big coffeepot; then asked Lathrop if he wouldn't like coffee. "Of course you do!" And she brought him a cup half filled.

Lathrop sat on a stool, and Molly brought a stool near and hugged her knees, hovering forward to hear every word.

Pop sipped the very hot coffee as if he had a leather throat. "This Dr. Baron—mayor?" He looked straight at Lathrop. "They'll make a fool out of him if he's an honest man—or a convict if he isn't." Then: "Just what was it you thought I could tell you?"

"Some seem to believe that the railroad will remain in the Harringsons' control. Some think it won't. What do you think?"

"I don't know." Pop didn't seem to care, either.

"Some seem to think that Mr. Hallard is not a competent—well, whatever he is—manager, superintendent, chief engineer?"

"I agree with them. A man that has as much trouble among his employees as Hallard does is damned incompetent!" said Pop. "Rhobb never had troubles. None that a few words, with maybe a pick-handle now and then, couldn't straighten out."

"I," Lathrop remarked casually, "have heard it suggested that Rhobb's death may not have been accidental."

"I don't know. What has that to do with buying lots?"

"Not much." Lathrop then asked: "Would you invest in Fenton City property?"

"Not any more than I'd put it on a card at faro."

"Plummer City?"

"Same."

Pop drank all of his coffee, worked his lips together. "Upsets my stomach, so much of it." Again he looked directly at Lathrop. "You want to know what I *think?*" Lathrop could see him studying as if indecisively; then he shook his head. "No. It's not that I am afraid. I just don't know. I'd hate to say things that hurt men, if they don't need to be hurt."

Molly gave Lathrop a quick look, got up and went to the other end of the car. She opened the stove door, poked the fire, threw in a piece or two of scrap from the lumberyard; then, as if without more interest in the conversation, she took a book, and pretended to read.

"Now, I know I wasn't quite fair to that old fool Simpson. There are worse in town."

Lathrop sat listening even after he saw that he was not to learn anything from this sad frail little old man. Presently Lathrop stood up to leave, drew a twenty-dollar goldpiece, offering it. Pop eyed it longingly, but demurred:

"You don't think I've said anything worth that much?"

"I've known men to pay lawyers more for less!"

Pop puckered his lips into his first smile. It was not much of a smile, but he said, "All right, and thank you, Mr. Lathrop." He took the coin, weighed it in his hand, looked at it. "Bread, whisky, taxes, clothes—all inside this piece of yellow metal!" Pop held it out. "Here, Molly. You take it, keep it. Buy groceries and things."

Molly took it, left-handedly. She then rolled the door so that Lathrop could leave. "If you see the Doctor, you tell him to come so Pop can thank him." She put out her hand. "Good-by, and thank *you!*"

Lathrop felt something being furtively offered him in the pressure of her hand. He slipped the folded paper from her fingers into his, and groped his way down the steps.

He went into the first saloon, a reeking groggery. He did not go to the bar, but stood near a smoky lamp.

Molly had written on a scrap of paper: *"Don't let him know I said so, but Pop does believe things he is not telling you, and that the Harringsons will lose the road. And I hope they won't."* Her pencil had broken through the paper in heavily underscoring the last words.

Out on the sidewalk again, he tore the note into bits and gave it to the black rain and the mud.

Chapter Nine

BELLE was dealing her game as usual, but there was no King Collins stalking about like a dead man in search of a coffin. People knew the report—and maybe some believed—that his arm had been injured. Fellows who had seen the encounter felt that more than his arm would be injured if he fooled with Lathrop again.

Lathrop hung up his slicker in the hall and went into the barroom. He took a place with men who were friendly with drinks, joined in the talk, and waited. He heard:

"Hell of a night for Senator Fenton to come in! . . . He's crippled, they say. . . . Daughter's pretty, I hear. . . . Rooms here all fixed up, and they say Taggart's got a buckboard all ready. . . . Roy Ford's done that! . . . When there's a pretty woman. . . . You bet!"

At the same time a few other men were saying: "Don't know if it's so, but I heard the marshal's been told to arrest old Simpson if he found 'im around town drunk! . . .

That's a good one! . . . Why, Ted Simpson 'pointed that marshal! . . . How can they make the Doc mayor without an 'lection? . . . I wouldn't want any Fenton City warrants —not with Plummer City all ready to— You buyin' anything down there, Sam? . . . Sure! Don't you think maybe I'm as big a fool as you?"

A rosy-cheeked youngster in a yellow slicker and hat came just inside the door, trailing water. He sang out: "Where's Taggart?" Men recognized him as a telegrapher and asked about No. 5. "Hell," said the boy, "she won't be in till midnight. I promised Taggart to let him know. Somebody tell him, will you?" Out he went, bedward-bound.

"Kids," said a man with sweep of hand toward the door, "that look like they'd need help to wipe their own noses, set there listening to keys chatter—and if they make a mistake, *wow!* Ever' train carries one of them baggagemen, or something. Anything goes wrong, then the train stops and the young monkey skins up a pole, hooks on a box telegraph and starts telling his trouble."

TIME passed. Lathrop felt weary, but he had patience, and the faculty of thinking of remote matters when he seemed to listen to idle talk. One problem was how to make Belle *want* to tell what she knew, or at least more, about Rhobb's death.

Doc Baron came down from the new room Taggart had given him—togged out like a Congressman, with a new wide black soft hat, white shirt and black bow tie. Cohen's big frock coat had been pressed, at least enough to smooth some of the wrinkles; and the black trousers were stuffed into high new boots. After a time the Doc sidled off from a group who were listening to a funny story, and went to where Lathrop stood alone near the end of the bar.

The frankness of their understanding after the monte game on the train gave the Doc a feeling of companionable trustfulness toward Lathrop. He regarded Lathrop with a slanting look, chuckled almost solemnly. "Such is life!"

Lathrop, with half-closed eyes, smiled in ironic congratulation, said: "Mayor, hm?"

"My boy, you have heard of the leopard's spots?"

"Leopard-skins bring money; you've got a big hide, Doc."

The Doc glanced cautiously about; then: "*That,* sir, is what alarms me! I've skinned many an ass in my time." He moved his shoulders a little and peered forward at the bar mirror. "I may be turnin' into one." The big soft fingers adjusted the black bow. "Shall we imbibe? And by the way," he added, mildly reproachful, "you showed Miss Belle the card I put up your sleeve. She come at me and boiled over!"

"I," said Lathrop in a quiet steady voice, "never lie to anybody if I know they'll know I'm lying. She guessed you had told me, and I said yes. Are you still interested in playing the railroad game?"

"Yes, yes," the Doc admitted without much interest. Again he gave a cautious glance to the left and right; then in a soft mutter: "I'm stumped tryin' to figger why all this finery has been stuck on me! 'Mayor'? My boy, I'm of the opinion that there is a colored person in the woodpile!"

"Go down and see that printer," said Lathrop. "Old McVey. Pop. He'll tell you something. I was there tonight. He said they'd make a fool or convict out of you."

"Um-hm!" The Doc scowled thoughtfully.

"And the girl—"

"Ah, beautiful child!" The big face lighted.

"She thinks enough of you to tell you something the old man won't. So don't ask him. But get out of her—and you can!—just why the old man thinks the Harringsons are going to lose the railroad!"

The Doc grunted understandingly, then half turned. Belle's hand was on his shoulder, her voice was as cheery as a voice could be. "Why Doc, you look grand! I'm proud of you! —And here, for you, sir!" she told Lathrop as if glad about it, and, reaching across before the Doc, laid down on the bar two gold, two blue and two red chips.

"Colonel Blade has been delayed." And Ayers smiled with curious meaning.

"You didn't cash in last night. Two-hundred-sixty." Her bright eyes flashed. "I pay my debts, don't I, Doc?"

Lathrop was a little distrustful of her unexpected friendliness, but even if she meant it dangerously, he would rather have her this way than angry. He called to the bartender, "Champagne, Charley," and spun a chip, slapped it down with the palm of his hand.

"I take a little rest between deals now and then," Belle explained, looking into the mirror to give a poke and a pat to her curls.

Men were coming up. Belle was a favorite who drew them, and she encouraged them too; and even if many talked at once, she seemed somehow to have a smile and answering word for each. Lathrop caught the bartender's eye and nodded: it was champagne all around. It was a bit expensive, but might help Belle's good will toward him.

Champagne foamed into shallow glasses, and heavy bottles thumped down below the bar, empty. The Doc put up both palms in protest, shook his head. "Not on top of whisky—*oof!*" A dozen men lifted glasses, looked to Belle for the toast. She turned, touched her glass to Lathrop's first, said slowly, "May you always win—" Then with a look around, inclusively, she laughed and added: "when I'm not dealing!"

All laughed and drank, and a quiet, lazy voice from near Lathrop's shoulder said: "You've won!" Lathrop glanced aside, and met Ned Patton's sleepy look.

"Here, aren't you drinking?"

"Not when I work—though so far tonight, I could." Patton nodded, his eyes queerly expressive; Lathrop never would have guessed that tonight Belle Menlinton was dealing with a straight deck and an honest deal-box.

Taggart took Lathrop to Roy Ford's room and, importantly, started an introduction, but Ford brushed him aside with, "I've wanted to meet you, Lathrop, sir! Send up more brandy, Taggart. Damn' wet night! Sit down, Lathrop. Sit down. Here, smoke?" He offered a nearly full box of cigars. "And Taggart," Ford called as the innkeeper was closing the door, "tell that man Ayers to be damned sure to let you know if anything more comes from that Colonel Blade."

t suggested" Lathrop said. "that Rhobb's death may not have been accidental.' "What has that to do with buying lots?" asked McVey.

Lathrop was examining a cigar as if admiring it; and when the door closed he looked slant-wise and asked: "Does this Blade happen to be that Yank raider?"

"I hope to God he is!" Ford smacked a fist to his palm. Then, "You're a Texan, Taggart says. In the War?"

"Yes."

"Southern, I take it?"

"With Forrest, mostly."

"The devil you say! Good!" Roy Ford, as ff his approval were something to be valued, put out his hand again. "This damn' Blade nearly ruined me during the War! The family too! Confiscated our warehouse full of cotton!"

"That," Lathrop suggested, studying the still unlighted cigar, "would have been by Harringson's orders?"

"It was!" Ford uncorked the decanter, pouring drinks. "When I heard the very gentlemanly treatment you gave that King Collins, I felt, sir, that it would be worth the trouble of making your acquaintance. Your health, sir!"

Lathrop raised his glass. "To the confusion of Blade and—*others!*"

Their glasses touched; they drank. Ford chose a cigar, and as he snipped the end, replied: "It didn't take us long to reach an agreement on a certain matter, but—" He paused to puff with the match at the cigar's tip. "You have to be careful what kinds of toasts you drink in this part of the world! You're bringing up cattle, I hear."

"I haven't said this to anyone else, Mr. Ford: I don't know much about railroads, but from what I've seen, I doubt if they can load and move the cattle fast enough to be satisfactory."

Ford sat down in a large armchair, stretched his legs, raised a foot to the seat of a chair before him. "Yes, yes, I'm sure they can, Lathrop. Though it gives me no pleasure to speak favorably of anything Harringson controls!"

"The War is over. But I would still drive cattle a long, long way to keep from doing General Harringson any particular favor!"

Ford laughed. "I like that!" But even in the compliment, there was a domineering assertiveness, as if expecting a person to be highly pleased when he praised. Then he straightened up with a challenging, "See here, though! Why, you took up for young Harringson—saved his life!"

"And," said Lathrop amiably, almost with casualness, "would have done the same for his father under the same circumstances. I have never yet been willing to see even an unarmed enemy murdered."

"Yes, of course, that's right," Ford admitted, but watched the smoke drift waveringly overhead. "Still," he began good-humoredly, "I don't think I'd have risked my neck to interfere if—" The good humor went out of his voice,

out of his dark handsome face. "—If that gambler had drawn on Colonel Blade, whether or not he was armed!"

"You have had personal encounter with the Colonel?"

"Never!" Ford jumped up, pushed a chair aside with his foot as if kicking it. "I never had a chance to meet him. From all reports, an utterly despicable fellow! You, Lathrop, you fought against Blade and Harringson both. For me the War is *not* over!" He threw up his head with wrathful pride. "When the South was defeated, sir, I would not live under that damn' Yankee flag; I withdrew to Europe!"

Mr. Ford implied that those of the Confederacy who had remained in the country had less resolution and were more easily subdued than he.

Then, perhaps thinking the question was in Lathrop's mind, he said: "Yes, you wonder then why I have returned? I am not at liberty to tell you, Lathrop."

"It would be annoying," Lathrop replied in mild pleasantry, "if each of us had to go about explaining to Tom, Dick and Harry, and other strangers, why we happened to be in a particular locality."

Laughter exploded in Ford's throat. "Good! I like that!" He poured more brandy, and after they drank, inquired: "Do you enjoy a game of poker now and then?"

"No, I must say that I don't, Mr. Ford. Seldom play. My gambling instincts are satisfied with—well, there are plenty of other hazards besides cards. Cattle, for instance."

"Have you found anything up here that excites your gambling instincts?"

"No," Lathrop mused reflectively, "not yet. I find a good deal of excitement over a place called Plummer City, and its future. And a few men, not many—and they don't appear to be persons on whose judgment I would care to risk much money—seem to think it is a good bet that the Harringson group will lose control of the road. A stranger, with no one to advise him, is likely to get into what is called a whipsaw. So I shall probably stay around for a while, then go back home."

Ford walked to the window, looked at his watch, blew smoke thoughtfully. "Bad night for Senator Fenton and his daughter to arrive." He did not sound as if expecting a reply. A long silence, and the thrash of the wind-driven rain against the hollow-sounding walls seemed to grow louder. Ford turned from the window, and smiled. "Of course, you have war memories that would make it a pleasure to bet against General Harringson!"

Lathrop's lips parted, then closed; the trace of a smile and direct look seemed reply enough. Ford studied the look, and smiled too.

"Of course, this is impertinent," he said, yet he had a slightly arrogant sound of not feeling that it was impertinent, "but supposing you knew you couldn't lose, how much would you be willing to bet against that pot-bellied windbag of a Harringson?"

And at that moment there was a pounding on the door. "Mr. Ford? Mr. Ford! No. 5 is coming in! Mr. Taggart said to tell you, Mr. Ford!"

Ford impatiently called: "All right, boy. I *heard* you!"

Ford turned to a closet and took out boots, a long rainproof cloak, and hat; and Lathrop's expression did not reveal how very much he would have liked to choke the boy.

Ford continued to talk, though now only of the discomfort to Senator and Miss Fenton in fetching them from the train on such a night. He stamped into shining boots, slung the long dark coat about him with the air of a cavalier.

"I am taking an ambulance to the train. Curtains buttoned down. Foul night, but would you by any chance care to go along?"

Lathrop, thinking of sleep, and also of some things that would probably keep him sleepless, shook his head. "No, thanks. My getting wet wouldn't make anybody more comfortable!"

"Hallard will be there. If it rained cats-and-dogs, he'd be there. He knows we've made arrangements here at the hotel for the Senator. Cars are drafty, even private ones. And windows leak! They always do in a driving rain. And I am concerned about having the Senator and Miss Fenton, especially Miss Fenton, comfortable. You see, Lathrop," Ford went on, widening his smile in a way that gave a hint of triumph, "nobody knows it—though perhaps some have wondered at my interest in her arrival—but I knew Miss Fenton socially in Washington!"

"And she expects you?"

"Why, yes. And that's a queer look you're giving me!"

"I? Oh, no! I'm thinking how lucky some men are! And a night like this—no need to try to sleep! If I stay around the bars, I'll drink more than I want. So if the invitation is still good, may I go with you? I can drive. I am a good driver."

Chapter Ten

In the wide downstairs hallway Taggart, making an uneasy apology, explained that the ambulance hadn't come. Roy Ford swore at him. "Didn't I tell you to have it here?" He expected his instructions to be followed.

"And what I'll do to that damn' stable man!" Ford said. "Come on, Lathrop!"

Lathrop buttoned down his slicker, pulled his hat tight against the wind, lurched out into the gusty blackness. Behind him, from the barroom, came cheery babble, as Roy Ford and Lathrop staggered through the straw and mud slop at the stable entrance. It was here Ford kept horses. Slipping and sliding on the greasy-wet sidewalks, stepping off into mud that came above the ankles, that splattered his cloak, and clung heavily to the boots, had stirred his temper. A lantern was burning on a harness peg, and the ambulance, with curtains down, had been run into the driveway, its tongue propped up on the up-ended neck-yoke. Ford called loudly, cursing.

A man came out of the shadows, not hurrying. He had been asleep and brushed idly at the hay that clung to him. "Aw right, Mr. Ford; they're harnessed an' ready to hitch. Just keep yore shirt on."

"None of your damned impudence!" Ford shouted.

The fellow, merely a hand hired for night duty, turned about. "You don't own the earth—even if you do try to ac' like it!" Having spoken, he went on, not hurrying. Ford looked as if something was strangling him, and Lathrop carefully seemed not to notice.

The fellow came back, leading horses that were already harnessed. Lathrop took one, led it to the near side, helped hitch up. Ford tugged jerkily at the curtains to make sure they were buttoned fast.

"When I see Mac," Ford told him, "you'll be out of a job!"

"Suits me," said the fellow, turning away, not hurrying.

Ford got onto the seat beside Lathrop, and as they together raised the rain curtain before them, he said loudly; "There ought to be a whipping-post and leaded blacksnakes for fellows like that!" He groped to fit the curtain-eye over its stud beside him. "In Europe, by God, peasants don't talk back to gentlemen!"

The fellow's voice came out of the shadows pitched to an exasperating drawl: "Ner in this country neither—to *gentlemen!*"

Lathrop shook the lines, clucked. The horses bobbed their heads reluctantly, and moved forward. In the street the thin wheels were half hub-deep, and hoofs slowly went in and out of the mud with sucking *plops*. Faint reflections shimmered dimly from windows and such doorways as were open. Far-off lightning fluttered, followed by the thunder's delayed deep cannon roll. Ford cursed the night as if it had some malice toward his plans, but Lathrop knew that he was in part also cursing the fellow in the stable, who most likely had never read, perhaps had never heard of the Declaration of Independence but knew its content.

Lathrop felt a pleased flush; mud and wind and rain could make a smear of gallantry. He hoped they would. . . .

No. 5 was not yet in. The telegrapher at Bamcot, thirty miles away, had wired when she passed. She would not make over twenty miles an hour, if that. Yesterday's dry stream-beds were in flood, making trestles shake; and more than ever the engineer—with tail-flags fluttering from the Fenton car—wanted to be safe and sure.

At the depot Ford said, "I'll go find out," and got off the seat. Lathrop tied the team, then stood in the shelter of the station and looked through the window.

Hallard, taller even than Ford, was talking with him, no pleasantness in his manner. Ford's cloak was thrown back over his shoulders, exposing long triangles of rich brown lining, and he moved his freshly lighted cigar about as he talked. Hallard's black eyes watched inscrutably. Ayers, chief clerk, in rubber hat, coat and boots, stood with neck outthrust in round-shouldered humility.

Lathrop walked away from the sheltered side to go around the small building to a window near the telegrapher. The young fellow, imagining Hallard's eyes on him, was doing his best to try to appear busy, and thumbed his pad of flimsy as if to make sure of something. Now and then he half rose from his chair to peer from the side window, hoping for the glimmer of a headlight. Lathrop studied the boy's face, willing to give over every dollar in the belt about his waist if he could trust him, but decided against the risk rather than against the boy.

A rain-blurred wink gleamed. Lathrop stepped up to the front window, tapped, pointed. The telegrapher peered forward and saw the headlight; then he turned to shout: "She's coming, Mr. Hallard!"

Lathrop stayed back against the station and was as concealed as if he wished to be. Ayers came to the platform with a lantern that dangled motionless at arm's length, but the telegrapher, who was also station-master, ran to the corner of the platform with his lantern and swung it slowly, helping the engineer to judge his distance and not overrun. The whistle sang out with long-drawn hoarseness, and the rain-streaked headlight reached out as if fingering the rails, cautiously. The engine crept up and passed by with a sound of panting; the oily warmth reached momentarily across the platform like a hot breath. Rain beat down with smacking hiss. The engineer, silhouetted against his lighted cab, gazed backward from his window. The train stopped with light *bump-bump-bump*, placing the passenger coach squarely before the station.

Before anybody could get off, Ford and Hallard went into the passenger coach to make their way through the train to the rear car. Passengers came off, lugging carpet-bags and valises. Nearly all were strangers, and when the telegrapher hurried indoors to tap some message, faces clustered at the ticket-wicket and asked loud questions.

LATHROP looked through the station window. Two or three women were grouped together—and one of them was Betty! Somewhere along the line she had changed her mind, got off, caught the train back. He wished she had broken her neck, but after seeing her here, he was not surprised that she was back. Something got in the blood of those who followed end-of-track towns; other towns and cities even seemed dull. Many men had told him so, and told of women that followed the tracks. He guessed the women would remain in the station's small waiting-room until morning.

A rippling jerk of cars ran through the train and the conductor's lantern swayed in slow signaling while the train moved on the wet tracks, as slowly as a train could move. It stopped with the lightest of bumpety-bumps, placing the Fenton car vestibule at the platform.

Roy Ford came from the car and shouted, full-voiced: "Lathrop!" Lathrop went forward, and had the amused thought of saying, "Here, sir!" but he didn't. Ayers, with the wet-rat look, was standing by, waiting for anything that Mr. Hallard might want, and lifted his lantern. Ford's cloak and hat were off. He had shed their dripping wetness on entering, and waited in the shelter of the vestibule, and a small person under the tight cowl of a blue raincoat was by him. Her face was as eager as a wide-eyed doll's.

"Here, Lathrop! Assist Miss Fenton into the ambulance." He explained that he was remaining to help the Senator, who was reluctant about leaving the car, though every draughty window ran water. "I have told him we have the ambulance and can drive straight to the hotel."

"Poor, poor Papa!" said the blue-eyed doll, with a bright look at Ford. "He thinks *I* ought to be distressed, and *I* —I *like* it!"

"This," said Ford, "is Lathrop. Friend of mine, and—"

"Oh, how do you do, Mr. Lathrop!" The doll-faced lips seemed to sparkle the words.

"You go with him, Allie. We'll wrap your father well, and—"

Hunch-necked Ayers had his lantern up, the better to see. Miss Fenton eagerly came into the rain with face lifted. Her long blue coat rustled stiffly as she put out a hand to Lathrop. When they passed in the glow of the station window, Lathrop could see that her head was up, as if she wanted the wind and rain in her face. "I like this! I do!" she told him, almost as if singing it.

At the edge of the platform on the other side, he explained: "You can wait here while I back up the ambulance! Don't blow away!"

Lathrop left the platform, slouched with drunken stagger through the mire, and backed the ambulance with hands lifted to the horses' bridles; then he cramped the front wheels as far as they would go so that he could hold the line from the platform. He took the lines from the whip socket, got back on the platform and unfastened the rear curtain, holding it up.

"Crawl in there. You'll have to feel your way."

She stooped, looked into the cavelike darkness of the curtained wagon. "Oooh, stuffy," she said. "I'll wait!" The wind was tugging at the curtain in his hand. "You are a friend of Roy—" She almost said, "Royal's."

"They are coming," he told her.

Hallard was holding the lantern now. Senator Fenton, wrapped from head to feet, was being carried almost upright by his black servant and a brakeman. Ford hurried up before them and gave Miss Fenton solicitous reproach for standing out in the rain. "Let Papa in first," she said.

Lathrop glimpsed a white aristocratic face, as Hallard held up curtain and lantern. Fenton, not wholly helpless, crouched, and with the servant's aid got into a seat that had been placed sidewise. Hallard returned the lantern to Ayers and followed the girl; he had to stoop very low. When he was seated, he took the lantern again, placed it between his feet.

"You ride with the driver," Ford told the Negro.

"Yas suh," said the Negro; but Allie Fenton called: "No, no, Joe! You come in here. Papa feels lost without you by him."

"Yas'm, Miss Allie."

Joe hesitated apologetically, stooped low, pulling the coat up out of the way of his feet. Hallard was beside the Senator, but Allie moved over, patted the seat with her gloveless hand. Ford helped button down the rear curtain as if trying to tear it.

"Are you coming?" Lathrop asked Ayers.

"Is there room, sir?" Ayers replied, submissively eager.

"On the front seat—three? Of course!"

Ford's ugly mood came out with: "Lathrop, anybody would think you were providing this carriage!"

Lathrop made no reply. The three of them got on the front seat. It was a tight fit, with the rain-curtain up. Ayers tried to make himself small; Ford sullenly seemed trying to expand.

The horses moved slowly. At times the rain lessened as if about to stop; and as they drove up Main Street, some of

the music of the noisy Tip-Top blew out with the shouts of laughter in it. Lathrop's thoughts went back to Betty.

Allie Fenton exclaimed with tinkling excitement: "Oh, listen! Listen! What is that, Mr. Hallard?"

"A sink of iniquity, Miss Fenton!" Hallard snapped.

Lathrop smothered a chuckle. After all, he did not have anything to chuckle about. Weary sleeplessness was dragging at his eyes, but as he thought ahead, he was not thinking of sleep.

"Hallard," Senator Fenton said perplexedly, "I do not understand it." The aristocratic voice was almost sharp. "The General told me Colonel Blade was already here!"

Hallard called, "Ayers!"

"Yes, Mr. Hallard?"

"How many telegrams have we had from Blade?"

"Three, sir. The first was almost ten days ago, and also from St. Louis."

"That is very strange, Hallard. I stopped for a full day in St. Louis. You would think that the General would knew where his—"

A gusty splatter of rain swayed the ambulance, and Lathrop did not hear anything more.

PEOPLE grouped interestedly at the Empire hallway. Any Senator was a personage; and Senator Fenton was distinguished. Everybody stared at Miss Allie, who, as soon as she was indoors, pushed back the cowl and was not embarrassed. Excitement glowed like firelight on her face, and the blue eyes danced with expectant wonderment.

The gypsy-faced Belle looked across young Harringson's shoulder. He was keeping well back, irresolutely, not yet sure of whether or not he wanted to be seen. "She is very pretty, Jack!" Belle murmured, though feeling something like jealousy of the young innocent-seeming girl. She pushed at Harringson's arm. "Go on, Jack! It won't look right not to!"

Hallard was there, and Ayers too. Hallard, tall, aloof, dark-bearded, steadied the Senator while black Joe removed the shawl and coat. Young Harringson felt that he just could not walk out and meet Hallard's eyes. He muttered to Belle: "I'll wait. Go up when they get settled. . . . You forget, I'm *out!*"

"This way!" Roy Ford urged, with a hand to Allie Fenton's elbow, trying to guide her to the stairs and on up. He was anxious for a moment or two alone, and had tried for it on the train, but she gave him no chance. His, "I love you, Allie!" had been abruptly earnest, and her, "Oh, Royal, I know you do!" almost casual and lost at once in her flitter of excitement.

"Royal" had frightened him. She promised readily not to call him that again but as if scarcely thinking of the promise. And his, "Why didn't you answer my letters?" got back merely: "I loathe writing, and besides you *knew* I would come!"

He had confidence in his persuasiveness with her, but the lively flirtation begun in Washington was serious and could be tragic in Fenton City. If Colonel Blade came and guessed right, Ford, as he called himself, might not lose his life, but he would certainly lose the trust, favor and inheritance of the Ganford side of the family.

Ford's hand pressed guidingly against her elbow to get her up the stairs, but she halted, "Wait for Papa!" . . .

When Roy Ford left the seat of the ambulance he had said, "Lathrop, take it back to the stable." Just that; no "please," or "will you?" Lathrop, amused, said, "Of course."

He drove back to the stable, roused the sleeping fellow who came, not hurrying, again brushing at the hay on his clothes. "Where," said the irreverent fellow, "is Mr. Goda-'mighty?"

"He stopped off at the hotel. Would you like to make a few dollars on a wet night?"

"Me? Huh? Yeah. How?"

"A lot of people got off No. 5 and are stranded there at the station. You can probably pick up a dollar apiece for carriage service. Mr. Ford might object to your using his horses for—"

"Them aint his. Them's Mac's."

"But the ambulance?"

"Yeah, that's his. But a little more mud won't hurt *it!* How many over yonder?"

"Ten, fifteen, maybe more. Some may have tried to swim through the mud. You'll have enough for a couple of trips, I'm sure."

"What time's it gettin' to be?"

"Almost two."

"Won't be nobody come in here for nothin'. So it's awright to leave. Think I'll do it."

"I'll go over with you, if you don't mind. I want to find out about something from the night operator there."

The stable-man found a welcome, and there were bids of more than a dollar for a place in the carriage. He took the women first, accepting a dollar from each, then let the men bid for the places that were left, and crammed them in. Lathrop waited in the darkness by the station, watching and not sure which of the scurrying women was Betty as they ran across the platform, guided by the stable-man's lantern.

When the ambulance drove off, he went into the station, spoke to the young man and asked about baggage for "Lathrop." There was none; he had known there wouldn't be. The conversation went here and there, Lathrop showing a sympathetic interest in the young man's work, expressing wonder that the chatter of keys could be understood as words.

Fellows who were still waiting lounged close to listen, idly. Presently the young operator opened the gate, invited Lathrop to come in and sit down. It was against the rules, but what were rules on a night like this, with the wires silent, and nothing to do? Time went by. The ambulance returned and took away such of the other mud-stranded fellows as would pay a dollar.

Lathrop listened, asking questions in a quietly admiring tone that drew information. He studied the boy, but remained unsure how far to trust him. "Just what do you do when a message comes in?" he asked. "I mean, how is it marked, put down, and all that?"

"All right. Supposing you are in Kansas City and want to telegraph here. Just give me a message. Anything." The boy poised his pencil over the flimsy.

"Let's say I'm in St. Louis. And I want to tell—tell—say, Senator Fenton. He has just arrived here. *'Hope you have had the best kind of a trip and are in good health.'* Then sign it *'Lathrop.'*"

"When it came in, it would sound like this," said the boy, and clicked away at a dead instrument. "Then I would take it down like this. Where's from, who's to, time, who sent it—see?" He opened a drawer. "Then it's put in an envelope, see?"

"Wonderful, isn't it? I mean the speed and all that. Marvelous invention. Use carbon and an indelible pencil, h'm?"

"Oh, yes, that's to have a copy on record, and—" The boy stripped his sample telegram from the pad, tossed it into the basket.

A few minutes later Lathrop thought he heard somebody calling. "Like a cry—shout for help!" They listened. "There, hear it? We'd better go to the door!"

The boy, with a touch of excitement, started at once. Lathrop paused long enough to recover the sample telegram, to pick up the stub of a pencil, a piece of worn carbon, and some sheets from the pad of flimsy, and to open the drawer and take out an envelope. He did it with deft quickness, like one accustomed to doing things of the kind, then followed the boy to the door, and they listened.

"My imagination," Lathrop suggested.

The third quarter of "The Iron Rainbow" will appear in our forthcoming November issue.

IN the dead sultriness of Manhattan midsummer there was no incentive to write. Marston's apartment was like the inside of a kiln. Two hours ago he had stripped off his damp shirt and sat down before his typewriter. Now, for all his labors, he had nothing to show but a dozen crumpled balls of bond paper flung haphazardly in and at the wastepaper basket.

"Damn novels!" muttered Marston. "And damn editors with deadlines. And damn this heat!"

He swept a handful of white and yellow sheets from the tray before him, leafed through them bitterly. It was a good idea, his plot for this novel. He read again the three chapters he had completed. It was good work; some of the best he had ever done; smoothly written. "The Underlings." A psychological story of defeat, and of ones who let themselves be defeated. *"The fault, dear Brutus, is not with our stars—"*

A good theme. And so far, a good job. But—

This heat! This overwhelming, enervating heat. He was, Marston realized with a sudden petulant anger, ill. Actually and physically ill. He gave up. With a final despairing glance at the white sheet shining in the platen roll, he rose. He was shocked to find his exhaustion so deep that, as he stood up, there danced before his eyes a black vertigo. But it was brief; soon it passed.

There could be only suffocation and discomfort so long as he remained here. Out of doors it would be hot too, but there might be a ghost of breeze stirring in the shaded streets down by the river. . . .

Marston put on shirt and coat, and went out.

He had not remembered the little bookshop was along this way—had, indeed, quite forgotten the little shop until suddenly there it was, just a few paces before him. Then he recalled the several occasions on which, before, he had seen it and planned to drop in for a browse. Each time, circumstances had prevented his doing so. But now—

THE bookshop was far from prepossessing in appearance. Ancient and musty, its only lure was the faint shadow of mystery ever attendant to dark neglected places. How long it had been a fixture in this neighborhood, Marston had no way of knowing. It did, apparently, but a slight business, for of the scores who passed it by, none save himself so much as turned a head to peer into its dusty window.

THE BOOKSHOP

Better books than have ever been published are being read, perhaps, in this Place.

By NELSON BOND

He had seen it first a year ago or so —that afternoon when, with poor Thatcher, he had been riding by here on a bus. Thatcher was a minor poet. Not a very good one, but an ardent one. He had been regaling Marston with an enthusiastic preview of his latest masterpiece, soon to be released.

"Very soon, Marston. Just a few more stanzas, and it goes to the publisher. It—it's good work, Marston. Oh, I know that sounds braggart, coming from me. But a writer can tell when his work is good or bad. This isn't like anything I've done before. It's poetry this time. *Real* poetry—"

His tone was pathetically eager. Marston murmured: "I'm sure it is, Thatcher."

"I *know* it is. I'm calling it 'Songs of a New Century.' It will make me, Marston. Up to now, I've just been a versifier. This book will give me a reputation. See if I'm not right— Oh, I say!"

He stopped suddenly. Marston, glancing up swiftly, remembered that Thatcher's health was reportedly on the thin edge. The man didn't look at all well. His cheeks were too pale, his eyes too dark and sunken. Marston asked in alarm, "What is it, old man? You all right?"

"What?" Thatcher recovered his poise, ventured the slimmest excuse for a smile. "Oh—oh, yes, quite!" But he pressed the buzzer that drew the bus to the curb, and rose, Marston thought, a little abruptly. "I'm fine, thanks. But I just remembered a little errand: Chap I have to see, in there."

And he pointed to the shop before which Marston now stood.

Marston insisted, "You're sure you feel well? Perhaps I should come along—"

"Now, don't you worry about me. I'll be all right. Chap's an old friend of mine." Thatcher climbed down from the bus. He called back over his shoulder: "See you later, Marston. Watch for the 'Songs—' "

He had, thought Marston regretfully, been mistaken. On both counts. They never met again. Nor did the new book ever appear. Poor Thatcher was not so well as he had hopefully claimed. It was his heart. The next day Marston read his name in the obituary column.

ALL of a year ago, that had been. Since then, Marston had thought often of the little book-shop. It held a sort of macabre fascination for him; an association of ideas Marston could not explain even to himself. Into that little shop Thatcher had disappeared. Marston had never again seen him.

It made the bookshop a—a sort of symbol.

Silly, of course. But last winter, when Marston lay ill of the flu and tossed for restless hours in delirium, it had become almost an obsession with him. A compulsion clung to him; he experienced an insensate desire to climb from his sickbed and visit it. A curious urge, but one so powerful that when, finally, he recovered, he *did* make a special trip to the little shop.

But he had chosen a poor time. It was closed. The door was latched and bolted, the shades drawn tight.

Now, however, it was not closed. The shade was up, the door an inch or so invitingly ajar. And though the shop was small, there would be coolness in its musty depths. The sun poured down on Marston's head, and pressed on his shoulders with a ponderable weight. His head ached, and a dull nausea was upon him.

He opened the door and went in.

THE transition from glaring sunlight to shaded dark was abrupt; at first he could see nothing. Somewhere in the back of the shop a bell jangled softly; ancient silences seemed to well in upon the cheerful, tiny sound, engulfing, stilling it.

Marston, stumbling forward, bumped against a table. Surprise brought a small, "Oh!" to his lips, and he clung to the table, waiting for his moment of blindness to pass. Out of the shadows before him came a quiet, sympathetic voice:

"Did you hurt yourself, my friend?"

Marston complained: "It's dark in here."

"Dark?" A moment's silence. Then: "Dark, yes. It is, I suppose. But peaceful."

Marston could see more plainly now. He stood in the center of a small, low-ceilinged room walled on either side with shelves of books. The table before him was also piled high with bound volumes. Some were old and faded; others, he was surprised to notice, were brightly new.

Beyond the table was a tiny desk, and at the desk a quiet figure sat, imperturbably scratching with an old goose-quill in a ledger open before him. In the ill light Marston could not clearly see the proprietor's face, but he saw snow-white hair shining like a halo in the gloom, and bent shoulders. There was, he felt, something vaguely familiar about the old man's features—something tantalizingly near the fringes of his memory. . . .

It slipped away even as he tried to grasp it. And the proprietor looked up.

"Is there anything in particular, my friend?"

"Just looking," said Marston. Like all book-lovers, he loathed efficiency in the management of a bookstore. He preferred seeking, in his own good time and at his own whim, whatever of literary interest the shop might hold in store.

The old man nodded.

"There is no need for haste," he said, and returned to his interminable scribbling. The goose-quill pen scraped dryly but not unpleasantly. Marston turned to the shelves.

It did not occur to him at once that there was anything unusual about the books on which he looked.

That realization came upon him gradually. Hence it came as a slow, growing wonder, and not with any deep, sharp sense of shock. There are so many books, so many authors—their names are legion and easily forgotten. Marston's eyes had traveled over perhaps a full row before there wakened in his mind the awareness that he had viewed something strange, puzzling—something that did not ring quite true.

He glanced back along the row. The proprietor made no attempt, apparently, to separate his stock according to subject-matter. Poetry, plays and novels, essays and texts, stood side by side in scrambled heterogeneity: Titles heretofore unknown to Marston; new names and old—old thoughts and new.

Then he saw a thin volume, brown with age. The title: "Agamemnon." And the author—William Shakespeare!

The hot spark ever latent in the heart of the book-worshiper leaped suddenly into a blaze. Marston, his pulse quickening with excitement, reached for the volume.

HOW could this be? What did it mean? "Agamemnon"—and by Shakespeare? He knew of no such title. This was one of two things; either the greatest hoax ever perpetrated in the name of art, or he had stumbled across an amazing discovery! He reached.

Then his hand, in reaching, stayed. For now he saw, senses sharpened by his discovery, still other titles; books equally unknown and equally amazing. "King Arthur of Britain," by John Milton. "The Leprechaun," by Donn Byrne. Robert Louis Stevenson's "Cannonmills," and "Darkling Moors," by Jane Austen.

Swiftly his gaze dropped to another shelf. He saw, with a vast, incredulous incomprehension, "Affectation," by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, "The Gargoyle's Eye," by Edgar Allan Poe, Thackeray's "Colonel Cowperthwaite," and "The Further Cases of Sherlock Holmes," by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

He had heard no footsteps, but he was aware that at his side now stood the proprietor of the little shop. There was quiet pleasure in the old man's voice.

"You admire my books, young friend?"

Marston could only wave a hand at the shelves. His speech was stammering, confused.

"But these! I—I don't understand!"

"You are Robert Marston, aren't you? Fantasy is in your line. You should appreciate these others."

Marston's gaze helplessly followed the proprietor's gesture. He looked upon names as well known to him as his own, but at titles never before dreamed of. "The Troglodytes," by Jules Verne; Charles Fort's "What Unseen Presence?" "Hanuman: the First God," by Ignatius Donnelly; Weinbaum's "Spaceman," and Lovecraft's bulky "Complete History of Demonology."

And under these, a smaller volume, a thin bright volume with untarnished book-jacket. Its title: "Songs of a New Century." Its author—David Thatcher.

IT was then, suddenly, that Marston understood. A great dull prescience filled him, and to his host he said in a voice that was strangely tired: "I suppose *it* too—*it* is here, then?"

And the old man nodded gravely.

"'The Underlings'? Yes, my son; it is here too."

There was but one copy, fresh and shining new as if it had at this very moment come from the publisher's office. The dust-jacket was brave and fair. Even in this shaken hour, Marston's heart knew a swift, high lift of pride in this, his book.

He reached for it—then hesitated. And of his aged host he asked: "May I?"

"It is your book," said the old man.

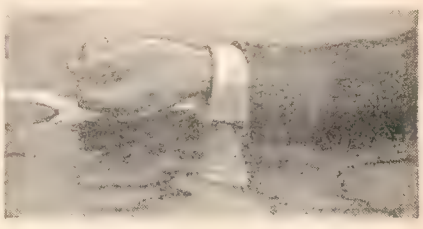
And Marston took it down. . . .

Oh, some few changes had been made, he found, in the opening chapters. But they were minor editings. In the main, those scenes were as he had written them. With shaking hands he leafed the clean white pages. His eyes sought avidly the words that heretofore had never known the permanence of print, the thoughts that up to now had existed only in his mind.

And swiftly though he read, he knew with a fierce bright joy that he had not erred in claiming this as his finest work.

There was no mediocrity in this book; no faltering, no stumbling con-

Illustrated by Charles Chickering



fusion of ideas. Each sentence was perfect; no word or thought or phrase but shone with lustrous purity. This was the book Marston had always meant to write; it was the book he had always known lay somewhere deep within him. Here was the triumphant accomplishment of his writing powers. And Marston, who knew books, knew that this book was great, and that in it, at the end, his skill had attained its full fruition. . . .

At the end!

He closed the book, and its closing was a small and startling sound in the fusty silence. He stared at his host, knowing now wherein that face and form had been familiar. A coldness was upon him, and a sudden fear, and he said loudly: "But no! Not now, old man! Not before it is finished—"

The old man said quietly: "Surely you see it cannot be finished over *there*, Marston? Nothing is ever perfect on that side. Only in this bookshop are stories and songs high and sweet and true as their authors dreamed them.

"There 'The Underlings' would be but another book — a cloth-bound, crippled symbol of a dream that died a-borning. Thoughts as lofty as the stars, faltering on words too weak to bear them. Tales finished over there are never truly great. Always they lack the wings on which their authors envisioned them.

"Only in the library of the left-undone may a story reach the heights intended by its creator. Here—beside an epic Homer ever meant to write, a play that Marlowe planned, but did not put into words, Galsworthy's last and greatest romance, ten thousand tales unwritten by a thousand dreamers—here 'The Underlings' can take its rightful place in the imperishable library of might-have-been.

"It is the final price for perfection. And a small one."

His voice soughed into silence like the last faint whisper of the ebbing tide. And it seemed to Marston that a new sound reached his ears; it was as though voices spoke to him from some not-distant place, voices greeting him in good fellowship, bidding him come and join their camaraderie. He heard—or thought he did—the laughing voice of Thatcher.

"What's all the fuss, old boy? My soul, but you're making an issue of a simple matter—"

NOW the old man held out his hand to Marston.

"Are you ready now, my friend?" he asked.

But—there was the book in his hand! And suddenly there swept into Marston's brain a thought so daring that an ague seized his limbs.

It was not yet too late! Nor would it be until that ancient hand met his. Could he but reach the street outside —and with this book!—"The Underlings" might yet be given to the world in all its dreamed perfection!

A swift decision stirred him. With a sudden cry he stepped back from the ancient's proffered clasp, whirled and stumbled toward the doorway. The worn knob slipped beneath his palm; the door held, and in panic desperation he tugged, panting, at the barrier. Behind him the soft voices rose in a wailing crescendo of dismay. A sigh whispered in his ear:

"There is no escape, my son. You but delay—"

Then the door was open; and sunlight, raw, hot and heavy as the crush of a monstrous fist, was blinding-gold in his eyes. With the precious volume clenched in his hands, he cried aloud his triumph, staggered into the street, running, running.

He did not hear the voices raised in swift warning, nor the startled rasp of the klaxon, nor the screaming grind of futile brakes. He heard only the deafening tumult of the world flaming into oblivion. . . . Then the silence again, and the soft voices calling him to join them. And the chiding voice of the ancient one: "You but delay, my son. Are you ready, now?"

And a cool hand meeting his own. . . .

"Over there, Officer. . . . I saw him wandering around in there. . . . That property has been vacant for years."

"COULDN'T *help* hittin' him!" said the truckman. "I swear to God I couldn't help it! This guy seen it—he'll tell ye. He come bustin' right out in front o' me, shoutin' like he was crazy or somethin'. I tried to stop, but—"

"Okay," said the big man in blue. "Okay. It wasn't your fault. Anybody else see it happen? Where'd he come from, anyhow?"

A witness, white of lip, lifted horror-fascinated eyes from the crumpled figure on the pavement. He pointed a shaking finger.

"Over there, Officer—that vacant lot across the street. I saw him wandering around in there, mumbling to himself. I think he must have had a sunstroke, the way he acted. That property has been vacant for years. Why he'd want to go in there—"

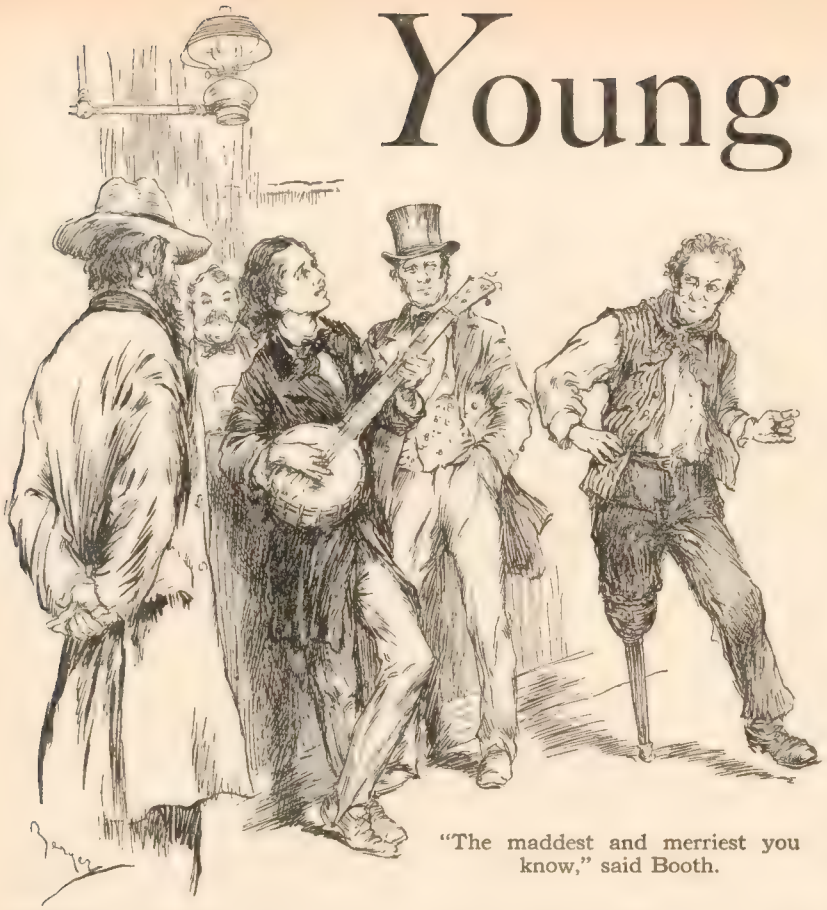
"I'll take your name," said the policeman. "Anybody recognize him? Let's see that book he was carrying. Maybe it's got his name in it."

Someone handed the book to him.

He leafed through the volume briefly, tilted back his cap and scratched his forehead.

"Hey! This is the queerest-looking damn' book I ever saw! Look! Three chapters printed—and the rest of it nothing but blank pages."

Young Man



"The maddest and merriest you know," said Booth.

SPEAR, bulking tremendous in his buffalo-robe coat, came into the room, his deeply graven features cheerful despite all.

"Come along!" he announced briskly. "Gad, it's cold in here! Come along and we'll take a look at things. If we can scare up some way of heating the house tonight, we'll post a sign and give 'em some sort of performance."

Booth stirred and stood up. He was a boy of nineteen, with wide brown eyes; his pinched features told of hunger, and he shivered in the overcoat he wore for warmth. He cast a glance at the banjo in its case, lying on the bed, and laughed bitterly.

"My father was right. All I'm good for is to strum the banjo between the acts."

"Buck up, my hearty!" exclaimed Spear. "They tell me the stage-coach will be in sometime this afternoon; the road's been opened. We may get mail, anything may happen! At the worst, I can get ten dollars for this buffalo coat, and that will buy us food."

"These people have no money themselves," said Booth, reaching for his hat. "There's an actual famine all through these mining-camps. What fools we were to come here! Well, on your way. . . . I'm with you."

They left the ramshackle structure of logs, boards and canvas, and started for the theater.

Nevada City, on its hill above the creek and cañon, was a dismal place although perched upon foundations of gold. This winter of 1852 had been a severe one with rain and snow and washed-out roads. The log cabins and makeshift houses, the theater with its imposing front, had been redolent of activity and wealth a few months before, beckoning the little company of actors up from San Francisco. They had worked their way from camp to camp, finally getting here—to a winter of disaster.

Their cash long gone, their credit exhausted, their performances too heavy with gloom to appeal to starving miners, they were now unable to get away; starvation was facing them, if they remained.

"Your father's in the East now?" asked Spear, as they approached the theater.

Booth winced slightly, as he usually did at that name.

"Heaven only knows!" he said, his face clouding. That mobile, dark face had more than a boy's strength; it held the firmness that comes only from suffering and endurance. "He should have stayed in California. He played to packed houses in San Francisco."

"I was on the wharf the day you landed with him," said Spear. "I remember that way he had of looking at people—a deliberate, challenging survey. Arrogance? Yes, but a heroic arrogance! You were at his elbow."

"I was his guardian," said Booth. "I've been his guardian for years past. Once here, he got rid of me and went his way."

Spear made no reply; he had ventured upon too delicate ground. It was no secret that Booth, the great Junius Brutus Booth, a world-figure as an actor, had been checked in his mental vagaries only by the son whom he despised and yet endured as guardian. His was purest genius, so akin to madness that the line of demarcation was but feebly drawn. Glancing at the dark, strong young face beside him, Spear shook his head; what a hell life must have been for this boy!

"Spear! Look—what's that sign on the door?" exclaimed Booth. A dread premonition seized him. They stood before the theater, looked at the sign, looked at one another. It bore the one word "CLOSED."

A shaky, bitter laugh came from Booth. "Why, then, this is the end! Or is it the end, Spear? No food, no fuel, no way to earn any, no credit. . . . No, it's not quite the end. A few more things might happen to reach despair's crowning height!"

"They had threatened to close the house," rejoined Spear, the practical. "Well, it's done; now there's only one thing we can do! Get off in the morning, hoof it to Marysville, and disband there. Thank God it's all downhill road!"

His hearty, cheery laugh had no echo in young Booth's heart.

IT was found that the Marysville road was open and the stage would be through sooner or later, and with it mail. In vain Booth pleaded with the agent for passage out, even if only for the three women of the company. No pay, no passage, said the agent briskly; and no credit for actors either.

"Good-by to the buffalo coat!" said Spear, eternally cheerful. "What say, Booth?"

"That settles it," the latter assented. "But first, the banjo!"

"Nobody wants a banjo; we've tried. The coat's in demand. You run along, and I'll hang around here and drive a bargain. If the stage turns up any letters, well and good; if not, I'll bring home enough for a feed all around, and

With a Banjo

off we go in the morning for Marysville and Frisco!"

Edwin Booth wondered at the elasticity of the older man, as he tramped back to the cheerless lodgings. Youth does not suffer, either mentally or physically, as do elder years; yet he was suffering frightfully from bleak despondency. He was, indeed, at the brink of utter despair. All the blithe resilience had long ago been beaten out of him.

ARRIVING at his lodgings, he dropped into a chair and huddled into it for warmth, with his soaked boots off and a blanket wrapped about his feet.

He was alone with his memories; they were things of terror, for they were bound up with his father's name and wild career. The words of Spear had wakened them in his heart. He sat with eyes closed, drifting back along the years. How often had he witnessed from the wings the magnificence of that man whose name he bore, the strange erratic genius whose art reached the sublime! How often, away from the stage, had he participated in what Spear so aptly termed the heroic arrogance of that unexampled spirit!

He had suffered from it; for the elder Booth had condemned his son to small parts, had ridiculed his heritage of genius. "Strum the banjo between the acts!" had been his ironic and contemptuous fleer. Such memories burn; and now, cast adrift, young Booth eyed the banjo with grim intentness. It had helped to get him here, at least, and it might help to get him back to San Francisco.

Nothing beckoned there. His brother Junius had been trying vainly for some theatrical opening; the entire Booth family seemed doomed, he reflected bitterly. With the father's departure for the East, the stage had gone to pieces in Eldorado. Actors were driven to touring the mining-camps, to desperate straits in saloon and dance-halls, not infrequently to suicide. He looked at the banjo and closed his eyes again, with despair in his youthful heart.

What magnificence, despite everything, had lain in the erratic soul of that father! Even the aberrations of that clouded brain held a touch of the bizarre glory of the melancholy Dane, or of the splendid doomed Moor of Venice. Upon the lad's mind stole the strange scene in Sacramento, that city so close to the golden diggings and all their harsh reality—the scene involving Charles Fairfax.

Even now the memory appalled him, in its possibilities. He had seen Junius Brutus Booth do and say some remarkable things, but never anything like this. They had gone up the river to Sacramento for an engagement that was ill-timed, since the city was filled with sad wreckage from the mining-camps; the greatest tragedian in the world could not compete with the everyday tragedy all around.

The dwindling audiences put the elder Booth into one of his savage and terrible moods, when nothing was too extravagant to appeal to his bizarre fancy. The boy, living in acute fear of what might happen, was wakened from sleep one night by his father bursting into the room, holding a lantern high and booming at him sternly:

"Up, scion of the ill-fated house! Up and dress! It is the witching hour, and we are called to battle with the demons of this world. . . . Up, I say!"

Trembling, young Booth obeyed. His father was garbed as *Hamlet*. The disheveled hair, the wild and rolling eye, the contorted but masterful features, told their own story; help was needed bitterly, and there was no help. In vain the boy made use of desperate pleas . . . he was abruptly ordered into silence.

His father led the way through the dark hotel to the street. At the hitching-rack stood horses. He was put into one saddle, his father took the other, and they rode through the night. Whither, on what errand, the tragedian would not say.

And they were not alone. In the darkness were murmuring voices; flitting figures, afoot, on horse and mule back, joined in. Presently they were part of a hurrying procession. To young Booth it was all bewildering and ominous. They were making for the edge of town; they were out of the city now, and flaring lights showed ahead, and trees, and a gathered crowd whose massed voice held a note of savage purpose.

Into the crowd they plunged. Booth's clarion accents cleared a way, and they rode on to the central scene as men gave them passage with mutters of amazement. Here, beneath the trees, the jetting flares lit up everything brilliantly; the noosed ropes hanging over the tree branches, the dozen masked figures with rifles and pistols, the two bound and helpless men who awaited their fate.

The meaning of it all rushed upon young Booth: this was a lynching-party; these masked men were Vigilantes who had taken the law into their own hands. California was filled with tales of them. The appalling number of murders and killings going on everywhere, before which the law was helpless, were being checked by more direct methods. Indeed, one of the masked men was reading aloud the charges of murder upon which the two captives had been tried and condemned.

"It's a lie!" burst forth one of the two, a fine-looking man. "I can prove where I was at the time, if you'll give me a chance!"

A chorus of yells shouted him down. Then, upon the yells, grew another voice that hushed them. Booth, dismounted, was striding forward, voice and air majestic.

"Vengeance! Vengeance!" Upon one and all, the words burst with new meaning. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord! Upon what warrant doth this court obtain? Under whose seal and hand run its decrees?"

THE effect of these words, sonorously declaimed by this fantastic black-garbed figure of majesty, was beyond description. Any interruption of the proceedings by a person of their own world would have met instant disaster; but here was someone distinctly not of their world.

"We don't want any interference here, whoever you may be," spoke up

Edwin Booth—the Edwin Booth of wild days when he and California were young—dominates this nineteenth story of "The World Was Their Stage."

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

one of the leaders. "Justice is being done."

"*Justice!*" Booth rolled out this word with all his grandiloquence. "Justice! And you are men who speak of this divine quality sacred to the gods! You draw it to yourselves, you make it part and parcel of your own habiliments! Interference? Heaven forbid! Sooner may this right hand decay and wither in the sight of all, than interfere with justice! My friend, how are you named?"

He turned to the prisoner who had spoken, and the latter replied quietly:

"Fairfax. Charles Fairfax."

Booth started back a pace. "Fairfax! You, a baron of England, a scion of that noble family. . . . Ah, my friends, listen to me!" He turned suddenly to the masked men. "Grant me this boon, I pray you; let me speak for these two human creatures here condemned!"

"All right, say your say," rejoined one of the hangmen.

EDWIN BOOTH had watched his father perform on every stage from end to end of the country; well he knew the incredible power which this man could exert over an audience, but never had he heard such uncanny and gripping eloquence as now broke forth from the elder Booth.

It was enhanced by mystery. No one knew or guessed who this strange black-clad man could be; "some preacher," was ventured and passed around. The magnetism of the man was not in his words, however, but in his character, his personality, his invisible ego bursting through the flesh to reach those who listened. In the ruddy flares, with passion and hot emotion leaping from every heart, with death trembling among the trees overhead, the force that he exerted was superhuman.

At first, few of the crowd understood his words or knew what he was talking about. Now he struck into a eulogy of the Fairfax family, the friends of Washington; this man before them was Lord Fairfax, and upon that name Booth strummed the whole gamut of the Revolution and the heritage of America. Was this English lord, who had come seeking his fortune like any ordinary clodhopper, to be hanged of a midnight because the court would not give him a chance to clear himself?

Let him be hanged, then! The watching Edwin, himself almost fallen under that spell of voice and personality, suddenly realized that his father was ranting very shrewdly; he was dragging in everything from *The Iron Chest* to Shakespearean scraps, and turning them to excellent account. Hanging was murder; good! And what was murder, but killing a body to let free a soul?

"I too have murdered." Low and intense were the words, yet they came like a very thunderclap upon the silence. Booth whipped out his dagger. He was acting, now, with all his usual passion; remorse, guilt, agony . . . at the portrayal of these emotions he excelled, and greatest was remorse. And yet, perhaps he was not acting, entirely.

"I too have murdered—" The words were dynamic. Young Edwin, and he alone, knew how *Macbeth* was talking upon the night, and how this tortured power borrowed from *Othello* and many another rôle. "Why, then, good morrow, friends! We shall be as brothers, as very brothers! Your souls harrowed to the quick like mine. . . . You have not murdered hitherto? Then you have missed the very essence, the marrow of real agony! Listen, good friends; here murder speaks to you, a true familiar of my haunted spirit."

Terror? A murderer spoke there, with subtle revelations of horror. The superbly cadenced tones, the balanced diction, had never rung so true; even to ears that missed the words, the meaning was clear. The man writhed before them in his access of remorse and guilt; then, suddenly, he began to pick out individuals around him—men whose pistols, rifles, bowie-knives made them conspicuous.

"And you—have you too shed men's blood? Have you drained life from some pallid corpse that once walked blithe and sprightly? Nay, nay, refuse not answer! Here we're friends together, murderers all! Or you, whose beard would shame a very Shylock, come, confess! Upon what night sped you the fatal ball, or used that noble blade to hack the life from some sweet human creature made by God? Why, here new victims wait! Well met! Well come, kind friends—kind murderers like myself—"

He shook them. His laughter was horrible to hear; far more horrible was his appeal to this man and that—his cunning, and his ghastly camaraderie. Madness? It was stark, staring madness, as young Edwin knew too well; and yet there was something about it so glorious and splendid that he listened with a catch in his throat. In this rough, turbulent crowd composed of all nationalities there must have been many a hand red with blood, for killing and banditry was a common occurrence at the mines.

Suddenly some Frenchman in the crowd broke the spell with a fleering jest about the preacher. Other Frenchmen and Latins shouted him down, but Booth swung around and seized the stage again. In his magnificent French, which enabled him to offer Racine before audiences of that blood, he rolled out his theme anew; instantly he had captured them, and he held them still spellbound, although the greater part of the throng were ignorant of his words. This did not matter, however; his power over an audience was the same in any tongue.

ABRUPTLY he was back to his original subject—the house of Fairfax. He pictured English lords giving up lands and titles to settle in America. He dragged in George Washington and the Revolution all over again. He pointed to the staring man close to being hanged—Lord Fairfax, Baron Fairfax—and demanded his freedom with a peroration upon justice which outdid his former efforts. As Edwin was well aware, he knew absolutely nothing about this man or the reason for the lynching except the name of Charles Fairfax, and upon that name he built, in a grotesque flight of fancy which reached the heights.

"By God, the preacher wins!" yelled somebody. "Turn 'em loose, boys!"

So, in the end, young Edwin found himself riding back into town with his father, with Fairfax mounted double behind him, the crowd streaming along through the night. Back to the dark, gloomy hotel and up to the elder Booth's room, with a magnificent disregard of the horses, and Fairfax must come along to have a drink.

"I owe you a great deal, sir," he said, rather awkwardly. "There was a miscomprehension in my case, though how you knew of it, I cannot say."

"I know of much that ordinary mortals ken not," said Booth darkly.

"And your name? I must have it," Fairfax exclaimed.

"The name, sir? The name?" Booth turned and jabbed his finger at young Edwin. "There is the name! The lad Edwin, named for mine ancient friend Edwin Forrest. I am Junius Brutus Booth, my lord!"

"I might have known it!" Fairfax shook hands, with renewed thanks. Then he said: "But how, Mr. Booth, did you know so much about me?"

"About you?" The tragedian bent his brows upon the man he had rescued. "I don't know one damned thing about you, sir."

"But my name! You knew everything—my family—"

"Oh, that!" Booth snapped his fingers. "I built upon the name of Fairfax, that was all, and it took their fancy. Why the devil are you staring at me? Why does it so astonish you?"

"Why, sir?" And the other smiled. "Because I *am* Baron Fairfax. I came into the title in '46, but I didn't suppose that a soul knew of it, because I've kept it to myself. I intend to go into politics, here in California, and it might work me great harm if known."

Silence descended upon the room. Booth stared at the man, and for once Edwin saw his father utterly disconcerted. He could have sworn that fear rose in those dark, glowing eyes. Here was no acting. Booth seemed to shrink, and then turned with a gesture toward his son, as though passing on all responsibility for something that affrighted him.

"If you have cause to remember this night," he said, "then remember me not, but bear the memory toward this slender son of mine, whose genius is pure and splendid as once was mine own."

It was almost the only compliment Edwin could remember from those lips.

HE came back to himself with a start, and shivered as he drew the worn overcoat more closely about him. Memories fled; here was the harsh present. That sad and tragic father had left, solitary and wandering once more. This was Nevada City, gripped in cold and famine.

"Genius pure and splendid!" Those words drew a bitter laugh to his lips as he glanced about the rough room. "*Poor and shabby* would be more like it. And now what? Somehow, struggle back to San Francisco, where my good brother is probably starving as well. The two Booths in starvation rôles! And always, in the background, that specter—"

Specter, indeed; that father of immortal genius, now become a mere wandering trouper, like a dread shadow ever against their backdrop of life. Was there indeed a curse that went with genius? And yet on so many occasions, as in that Sacramento episode with Fairfax, the erratic father's madness had held a queerly haunting touch of what could only be termed some deep unknown sanity. . . .

The afternoon was over; the winter sun set early. Booth shivered again as he thought of what the morrow must bring. He had made his start in life, he had begun his career, in an ironic futility that would have drawn a grim laugh from that man of heroic arrogance, as Spear had so rightly termed him. Arrogance? Perhaps; yet to Edwin, there was something desperately lovable in that arrogance. Himself deeply affectionate by nature, he had suffered too long with that older man not to hold him in a wildly passionate love that excused all his faults. Those years had schooled him harshly, yet they had schooled him; he had served devotedly, loyally, bravely—and all for nothing. Or so it seemed to him, unconscious of the character these bitter years had evoked within his shell, and molded bit by bit.

A step shook the ramshackle place. He looked up; the step had halted at his door. The instant of waiting struck him with ominous presage. He called out sharply:

"Well, come in, come in!"

The door opened. Spear stepped into the room, and Booth nodded to him.

"Oh, it's you! Did the stage arrive? No letters, of course, except old duns; yes, I see you've one in your hand." Booth checked himself as he met the gaze of Spear.

"A letter from my sister, in New Orleans." But Spear was no longer cheerful; his customary jaunty air was gone. He looked heavy and old and sadly grim. Booth, meeting those grave eyes, suddenly caught the unuttered message; he came to his feet, and a cry broke from him.

"You've had news of my father. . . . He's dead! Is that it, Spear?"

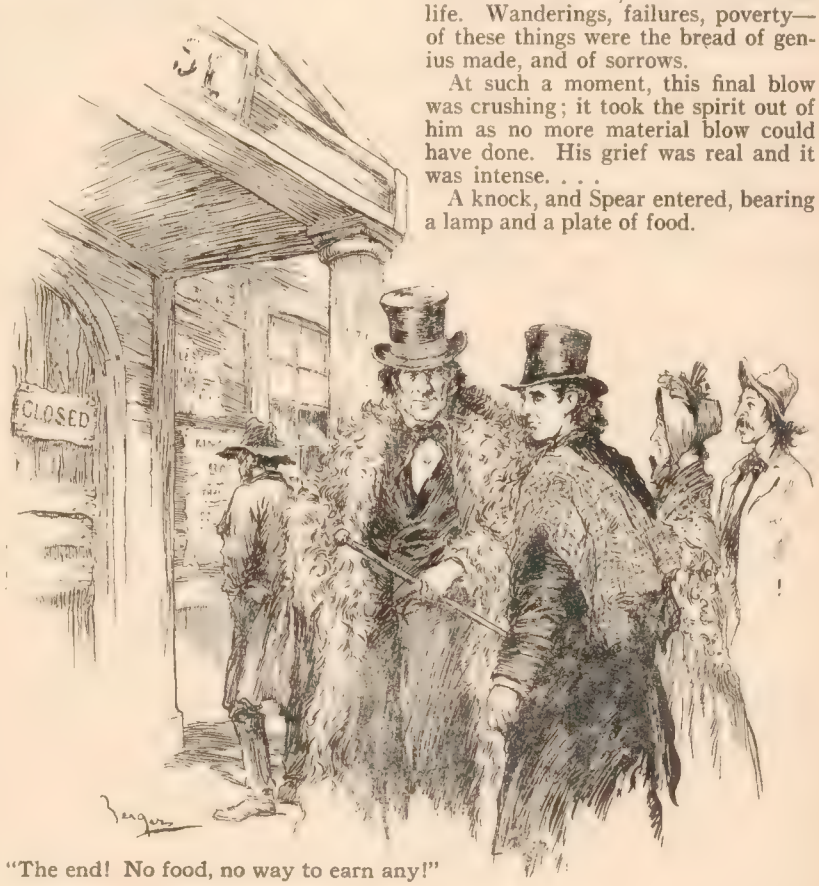
The other assented. "I'm bitterly sorry to be the one to break the news, Edwin. Yes. You've said it. There's another letter here for you, probably with the same word. He played in New Orleans to capacity houses; it was a tremendous success. He started upriver by boat, and was found dead—"

"He died alone," said Booth, as though stunned, and sank back into his chair. "Dead! Alone and among strangers—dead!"

OBLIVIOUS of time, he sat alone with bitter memories of that man of sad and tragic genius, as the day sank into darkness, and with it all his life. Wanderings, failures, poverty—of these things were the bread of genius made, and of sorrows.

At such a moment, this final blow was crushing; it took the spirit out of him as no more material blow could have done. His grief was real and it was intense. . . .

A knock, and Spear entered, bearing a lamp and a plate of food.



"The end! No food, no way to earn any!"

Illustrated by
Merritt Berger

"Sit up, lad, and eat," he commanded. "For your body's sake, eat! God knows there's not much; but the others send you their sympathy and love to sweeten the fare."

Kindly words, these, and young Booth forced himself to obey.

"You know, I had always hoped there'd be a change of fortune—for him," he said. "That hope bore me up through everything. That some day his life would know smiles once again and tenderness, and an end to wanderings! To think that the end came to him alone—that's what hurts."

"Then you're far wrong," said Spear bluntly. "You're grieving for him as you see him, not for him as he was."

"What d'ye mean?"

"I mean that he had a glorious end!" said Spear. "You're full of sentiment; he laughed at sentiment! He's dead; well, you'll be dead some day; I'll be dead. Nothing extraordinary about his dying, except for the blaze of happiness it must have brought him. He died upon triumph, a ringing, superb triumph of his art! He lived for his art; the poor damned clay of Junius Brutus Booth was only a thing to be scorned. Would you have had him go down like the elder Kean or old Mathews—worn out and lost in the horrors of futility? Devil a bit of it! His end came as he'd have chosen himself, with his name thundering on the lips of audiences—why, I wish I were as sure of the same fate!"

"That's something to think about," said Edwin, and was comforted, for the words held a profound truth, as he could recognize.

None the less, he slept little that night.

THEY were out and off with the sun, after a scanty breakfast, due to what was left of the proceeds of the buffalo-robe coat. Off, luggage in hand, young Booth with the banjo slung over his shoulders; two Australians, an Englishwoman, the others Americans—off and out of town, down the snowy road for Marysville, tramping along with song and story to throw off the burden of disaster, courage to the fore and making plans already bubbling with optimism.

But Booth walked alone, except when Spear fell in beside him. In vain he tried to summon up high spirits; the weight was too crushing. The sense of failure bore him down, and for him the future was blank indeed.

The miles of snow and mountain road fell behind; they passed Grass Valley, Rough and Ready—occasional mining-camps that gave curious stares but afforded no haven. Thirty miles to Marysville, tramping grimly determined while the morning waxed to noon and the afternoon waned toward sunset. There were no other travelers on the roads except the stagecoaches that went whirling past with cheery greetings or bibulous jeers.

Long after dark the welcome yellow lights peered forth, and they came dragging themselves wearily into the growing town.

Spear asserted he had friends here, and departed in search of them; Booth went to the hotel and made a desperate plea for credit, hoping that his name might at least be known.

"Booth? Never heard of you, mister," said the proprietor. "I don't hold

"Interference? Heaven forbid! Sooner may this right hand decay and wither in the sight of all, than interfere with justice!"

by no actors anyhow—wouldn't trust one of 'em acrost the street. What's that, a banjo? Say, are you the young feller with a banjo that come through here in the fall? Well, by gum! Tell you what I'll do: I'll give you and your folks supper and lodgings if you'll give us a tune in the bar."

Spear drew blank; his friends had gone. But here was warmth, food, a bed—they took turns at entertainment in the smoke-filled saloon, young Booth strumming lustily, a song here, a recitation there. It was the most successful performance the troupe had put on for many a long day.

WITH morning came farewells, and disbanding. The parting with Spear came hard; they shook hands and agreed to meet later, if luck came to either. Then Booth slung the banjo over his shoulders and struck off down the street. His way lay alone, to San Francisco, a hundred miles; a fine morning's walk, he told himself—and got out of the town and away from the others as swiftly as possible. Thank God the snow lay behind, now!

He tramped along, every mile taking him closer to the settled country and the fair valleys. Three days, he told himself, and he would be there. Then what? He would meet his brother Junius, get sufficient funds to reach the East—and then what? The damnable question was like iron in his soul.

Failure, utter failure, precisely as his father had predicted for him if he attempted the stage. Nothing awaited him at the end of this walk except the confession of failure; he was the only Booth who had gone down to disaster, complete and irretrievable; this realization haunted him every step of the way, and brought in its train a temptation that he pondered calmly along the weary miles.

Suicide—was not this the best way out, after all?

The thought was not repellent, here in this new country, as it would have been in an eastern city. Here suicide was a common occurrence. Men who had bartered everything except their souls, in the effort to find gold, too often let their souls go with the rest. Or those who nad found gold and lost it again, or those weary of vain struggle, rid themselves of the body and thus ended it. Among the ranks of actors in this golden land, suicide was almost an epidemic.

To young Booth, it was thus nothing to shrink from, but a project to entertain with serious weight. He had nothing left to fight for or with. The thought grew with hunger and weariness and the passing day, and late in the afternoon, when he came stumbling into a little town where four roads met, he was nearly at the point of affirmative decision.

Not much of a town—log shacks, a saloon and tavern, a few stores, farming lands stretching down the sunset. Here, obviously, was the place to spend the night, and Booth headed for the saloon and tavern with intent to try to barter the banjo for a lodging. He was aware of a man sitting on a bench outside the tavern door, and the man spoke to him.

"Hi, there! Young feller, what'll you take for it?"

"Eh?" Booth halted and blinked at the man, a rough, hearty man whose right leg was a wooden peg and whose voice had a strange accent, neither English nor cockney but a touch of both. "For what?"

"For what you've got," replied the other, chuckling. "I could do with it."

BOOTH came to the bench and sank wearily upon it.

"You look sane, so I'm probably mad," he said. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"You, swinging along with a banjo over your shoulder and youth in your eye! Give me youth, and I'll trade you all the world for it."

"Oh!" said Booth. "Is the world yours?"

"Used to be. Squire's the name; I'm a new chum here—came over

from Australia last fall with five hundred quid in my pocket, a song-and-dance act that had top billing, a wife and two kids; and an engagement."

Booth gave his name; apparently Squire had never heard it.

"You're a lucky man," Booth said, "especially to have an engagement!"

"Oh, that went right after I landed—theater burned down," said Squire.

"Well, you've got plenty left, and you don't look old. Why wish for youth?" Booth asked.

SQUIRE chuckled as he filled a clay pipe with rank tobacco, and got it alight.

"Young man with a banjo! My God, what I'd give to be in your shoes!" said he, and stretched out his wooden leg. "See that pin? Dancing days ended. Kids took smallpox and died. Wife ran off with a Chilean; I think she went a bit off her head when the kids passed away. Blood-poisoning from a cut took my leg. Jonah, reg'lar bloody Jonah, that's what! The money went over the tables, and here I am, wishing I had your luck."

"Wishing you had—" Booth lifted his head and looked at the man, and caught his breath. "My luck!"

"Two feet, youth, and a banjo. . . . Aye, mister, that's luck! And I've got a job here as groom and hostler; I can hustle around on this wooden pin, you bet! Give us a tune on the banjo, and I'll teach you a jig step that'll bring down the house! Just got time 'fore the up stage gets in from Vallejo. . . . What say to a drink of beer?"

"By all means," said Booth. The other hopped up and went into the saloon.

Booth uncased his banjo. Laughter seized him—laughter that was only part mirth. Suicide? The temptation was banished for ever. He suddenly looked back at himself with a shudder of repulsion, and laughed the harder; why, here was a situation into which his grim father would have flung himself with gusto!

"And so, by heavens, shall I!" said Booth. He looked up to see Squire coming with a mug of beer in either hand; accepting the one offered, he bowed, clinked glasses, and drank with a heartfelt sigh of gratitude.

"Now for the banjo!" said he, and uncased the instrument. "So you were a dancer, eh?"

"None better from Melbourne to Ballarat!" exclaimed Squire, tossing off his drink at one long swig. "If I do say it as shouldn't, you'll never get a better teacher. What sort of a step will ye have me teach?"

"The maddest and merriest you know," said Booth, laughing, and swept from the banjo strings the lilting, catchy rhythm of "Garry Owen."

When the up stage from Vallejo turned in before the tavern stables, it was upon a singular and memorable sight. A number of bearded, red-shirted miners and farmers had poured from the tavern, and were delightedly watching two figures, amid roars of applause and wild shouts to "keep going it!"

One of the two was a young man with a banjo, who maintained a continual strumming while he capered back and forth. The other was a man with a wooden leg, obviously teaching him the steps. This pleasantly incongruous proceeding had fascinated the watchers, and nobody paid the least attention to the arrival of the stage in the sunset, until from one of the disembarking passengers broke a shout of recognition and amazement.

"Edwin! Edwin! For the love of God, man, have you gone stark mad?"

Young Booth clashed the strings, halted, and recognized his brother. He tendered Squire a bow, and extended the banjo and pick to him.

"Good friend, my evil destiny has caught up with me; the lesson is finished. Take this instrument and keep it in memory of one whom you taught more than you know." He swung around and clasped hands warmly with his brother. "Junius! Well met indeed, brother; why, it's amazing! Whither bound?"

"To find you. To Marysville, Nevada City. . . . Why the devil haven't you answered my last two letters?"

"I've had no word from you for the past six weeks."

"I was afraid of that. They've gone astray. . . . I came myself to get hold of you. And to find you here, acting like a madman—well, I'm speechless." Junius Booth shrugged. "You've not heard the terrible news?" he added, lowering his voice.

"Plenty of it. I've heard the news, also, that our father is happy at last."

The elder brother stared at him. "Damned if I can understand you, Edwin! See here, I've brought news that's simply tremendous. But we can't discuss it here. I must get my bag from the luggage-box. . . . Go into the tavern, order dinner and a bed for us, and I'll be with you in no time."

"Dinner?" Edwin lifted his brows. "You're serious? You're able to pay for it?"

"For God's sake, get about it, will you?" snapped the other, impatiently, and turned to secure his bag before the stage departed.

THEY could not wait for dinner; over a drink, Junius poured out his news. Edwin listened, at first with incredulity, then with stupefied amazement. It came to him, literally, like a bolt from the blue.

"Maguire, the old impresario, has built a new theater, the San Francisco Hall," went on Junius. "I'm joint manager with him; actual manager, in point of fact. We've got a splendid company together—Robinson and the Chapmans, all the finest talent in California. There's plenty of backing. It's to be a roaring comedy house that's certain of success—"

"Wait!" intervened Edwin. "What you said about me—it doesn't make sense! I'm no comedian."

"No, but you can fill in occasionally. However, you're to be featured in all Father's great parts. . . . I've already announced you as appearing in all the famous rôles of the English drama. Your career is beginning, Edwin! I know well that our father's mantle has descended upon you; all his fire, all his genius, is yours and not mine."

Bewildered, young Booth pulled himself together.

"But I don't understand! How the devil did this happen?" he demanded. "How did you convince anyone that I was an actor?"

"I didn't." Junius dropped his voice. "One of the backers insisted upon it, I understand. I don't know the man at all; however, it's been put through and settled to the general satisfaction, so for the love of heaven accept the matter and don't object!"

"Object? Far be it from me to object," said young Booth. "Who is this mysterious angel in human form? What's the man's name?"

"Nobody's supposed to know, so keep it quiet," his brother replied. "I don't know him myself. Some politician, I understand. Charles Fairfax is the name. You know him?"

"No," said young Booth.

NO—for a moment recollection did not come to him. Then he sat stunned and silent; until suddenly he gripped the table and came to his feet.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Junius. "I have a toast to propose, before dinner comes."

"Just a moment, brother," replied Edwin. "I'll be back instantly. A duty that I should have attended to long ago."

He stepped outside the tavern. The stage had long since departed; the place was dark and empty, the stars were out. From somewhere came a feeble tinkle as Squire attempted the banjo.

Young Booth removed his hat and looked up at the stars.

"I've been remiss," he said softly. "For all that is and was, dear Father, accept my heartfelt thanks, my love, my humble gratitude. Good night."

He came back to the table and sat down. His brother surveyed him critically.

"Gad, man! You look positively sparkling!" He lifted his glass. "Well, here's the toast: to the beginning of a career at the San Francisco Hall, and may it make Edwin Booth the greatest actor in the world!"

A Book-Length Novel

By GRANVILLE CHURCH

DEVIL, SPROUT WINGS!

DEVIL, SPROUT WINGS!

ARRIVING at Cabeza de Negro was like coming home. Neither Curt nor Lee had ever visited the one-time small fishing-port in the old days, but that was the way it hit them now as it rose up out of the sea. Once it had been only a collection of manaca shacks on stilts, cut off from inland by fever-ridden marshes. An unhealthy spot for white men. Today all that was changed—or fast changing.

They were up at dawn for the early docking, and to watch the long low blur on the horizon which slowly became the Tierra Libre coastline. Lee caught her breath as that blur took shape. Her memories of it were precious.

She'd been happy since, true; and now she had the boys. But no happiness, not even the children, could ever erase from her mind those first years here with Jeffrey Curtis. Hard-working days for him, in a job for which he was born; romance and beauty in the tropic setting for her.

Unconsciously she moved closer under Curt's arm as they stood at the rail staring landward. Unconsciously, too, Curt was scowling, but Lee did not see this.

A lean, low gray vessel was cutting in toward the coast farther to the north.

"Headed for Soledad," Curt muttered.

Lee clutched his arm. "It's a destroyer! One of ours, Jeff! Must be. And it's racing! Do you suppose—There wasn't any word on the bulletin-board."

Curt patted her hand and smiled down at her.

"Don't be getting ideas," he said, and was immediately conscious he'd taken a second or so too long in replying. "There's no revolution here. Uncle Sam's just paying a courtesy call. We're doing more of that than we used to throughout the Caribbean."

"But it's speeding! See how the smoke lies flat from the funnels!"

"That's on account of the wind from around Punta Cauca. Our smoke would look the same if we were in that position."

"Oh, dear! We saw one revolution here, and had a cruiser standing by for weeks at a time. But now, with the children, and we won't be on the coast—"

"Come, come, Lee. A revolution doesn't blossom overnight. Jerry would've warned us before we left the States if there'd been any trouble brewing. Forget it."

They finished the round of the deck, to wind up at their starting-point and silently watch the shoreline take shape. Again Curt fell into a mood, though he remembered to keep his thoughts from his face. And it wasn't sight of the destroyer that caused it, but the warning he'd had from Zora Mitchell.

"Don't come!" she'd written.

For five days that note, in an inside pocket, had burned hot against his chest. Now, as he stood at the rail with Lee, Curt once more went over in his mind the string of events leading up to their presence here on the *Pisces*—as he'd done so many times these past several nights, lying awake in the dark.

He started with the proposition itself.

He and Lee had been dawdling over a late breakfast, while the children played on the lawn within range of the open windows. He had the morning paper folded to handy size and propped against the coffee urn, and was sunk in a roving reporter's column purporting to give the progress of bombproofing the Panama Canal, the removal to safer underground spots of all control mechanisms. Curt knew the report was only guesswork, but it held him. Anything that touched the Caribbean could send him into the blue. He looked up to discover Lee had been running over the morning mail, and had asked him a question.

"Who do I know in Cristobal?" he said easily. "Why, no one, I guess. There's old Jim Bragg over on the Pacific side. Letter? Gimme."

She handed him the letter. He ripped it open, slid out the several sheets of enclosure.

"Only mailed from Cristobal." He read aloud the letterhead: "'Compaña Agrícola Tropical, San Alejo, Tierra Libre. Port, Cabeza de Negro. Cable, CAT.' Huh! Who do you suppose they are? Cabeza's that little fishing-village down the coast from Soledad, but I never heard of San Alejo." He glanced at the end of the letter. "Signed, 'Apolonio Montaya, President and General Manager.' Never heard of him."

He ran his eye down the first page and exclaimed:

"Why, honey, it's a new banana outfit! Opening up twenty thousand hectares between the rivers Masica and Negro. But that stuff's all swamp-land! You remember, Lee, that big stretch of swamp across the Negro, dotted with a few spots of jungle? It extends all the way from where the railroad hits the Negro at Riverbend Junction to *finca* Uraña. You used to rave about the clouds of egrets and flamingoes—"

"And the mosquitoes!"

Curt grinned and skimmed over the rest of the letter hurriedly. Lee saw his growing excitement as he straightened in his chair.

"Lee! They're offering me the job of chief engineer! He took a deep breath and went on more slowly, soberly: "But they say the offer's contingent upon residence with family for term of contract. Three years. Of course, if I had the job I'd like to have you and the kids with me, but—"

Lee rose and went around to him. Here was a situation to be handled, one to be nipped in bud. It took her a moment to find the right words.

"You'd like that job, wouldn't you, darling?"

It was more statement than question.

He lowered his eyes. "Well, I'd—I'd—yes, sure I would! That'd be a real job! Just think, Lee. Drainage, levees, floodgates, railroad, power plants—all types of projects! And a swell chance to work on that overhead irrigation system that I missed out on when we came North."

He broke off again; and his eyes went blank to hide, or try to hide, how much this could mean to him.

"Well," he went on carefully, "it'd be something more than this kindergarten stuff I'm doing now. Twenty thousand hectares is quite an order."

"Yes, I know. But—there are Buddy and Chuck. We can't take them to a malarial swamp—and with Buddy ready for school this year."

"But Lee, they cover that here! They say—" He swallowed hard, dodging her steady gaze. "They say they have excellent accommodations halfway up the Quebrado Mountains, including hospital, school, clubhouses, swimming-pool, tennis courts. They claim there's no fever in their settlement—San Alejo, they call it. And Lee, we ought to like it as well as we liked Puerto Soledad."

A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

By GRANVILLE CHURCH

She got up and stood at the window, hands locked behind her. At length, without turning, she asked: "How do you know they're responsible people?"

"I wouldn't accept without investigating them!"

"The letter is headed San Alejo, Tierra Libre, but it's mailed in a plain envelope from Cristobal," she mentioned.

"Oh, that's explainable. They put their mail aboard an Associated ship at Soledad, no doubt, whose purser dropped it at Cristobal for faster air service. It came by air, you know."

"And the plain envelope?"

"Well-l—" Curt fidgeted. "I don't think that means anything. Maybe they were out of printed ones. Or perhaps in mailing it on an Associated vessel, they were being wary of Associated finding out too much about them. They're rivals, Lee."

She tried another slant:

"The war in Europe, Jeff—"

"Lee, don't be silly! How can that affect Tierra Libre?"

"We'd be so close to Panama, the Canal. If America should become involved in this war—we were once before—"

"Lee! We'd not be so close that an attack on the Canal would affect us, if that's what you're thinking. A banana plantation could hardly be mistaken for the big ditch. Besides, how could an enemy get that close to the Canal?"

"Well," she hedged, "you know how the Germans have wormed their way in everywhere. And doesn't Germany have a commercial airline with a string of bases somewhere in northern South America—"

"Hah! Don't just talk words, darling. What do you suppose Uncle Sam's doing? Reading a book? Germany no longer has those lines."

"I have a feeling, I can't explain, but—" She bit her lip. Finally, with reluctance, she said: "Well, at least it won't do any harm to find out more about these people."

That was the first step that led to their being here on the *Pisces*. The second—

CURT had put in a short-wave phone call for Jerry McInnis, his closest friend during the years he'd worked in the tropics. McInnis was now chief engineer for the Associated Fruit Growers at Puerto Soledad. The call came through later that morning. Greetings were quickly over. Then:

"Jerry, what do you know about the Compañia Agrícola Tropical? Claim to have that swamp between the Negro and the Masica—"

"Yeh, I know; only, it won't be a swamp much longer. They're doing a swell job of reclamation, Curt. Well, I don't know much about them. Guy called Montaya heads the outfit. There's a whisper around he was hooked up with Cedillo in Mexico and got out by the skin of his teeth when that revolt failed. But that's only gossip—take it for what it's worth. Seems to have plenty dough behind him, but I don't know where it comes from. Old Man Moore probably has the low-down, but you know how tight-lipped he is."

Moore was General Manager in Tierra Libre for Associated Fruit Growers.

"Who's in with this Montaya?"

"Don't rightly know, Curt. Montaya seems the only top man so far's I can see. There's a couple of Swedes I don't know anything about—except they hold their liquor and don't talk. Youngish guys. And a Dutchman—Hollander, I mean—a chemical man. Panama disease has shown up over on our side, and if they're going to raise bananas they'll have to find some means of combating—"

"Yes, sure. But how come Associated didn't have that piece tied up? Never heard of anyone getting ahead of old man Moore before."

"Well, we've already got plenty of good land, all we can handle now or in the reasonable future. And this piece'll cost real money to develop. Why all these questions, Curt?"

"Under your hat, Jerry, but they've offered me the job of chief engineer. Wanted to know more about them. Think they're reliable?"

"Well-l, yes, Curt, they are, so far's I know. But I'd hate to have you make a decision on my say-so."

"Who's been handling the job?"

"Chigger Mitchell."

"What! Old Mitch? He's a good man. What happened they need another?"

"Well, you know how Mitch was kind of tough on labor. A driver, and all that. And he could sure find a guy's weak spot and dig under the skin. He didn't get the name 'Chigger' for nothing. Well, he must've made an enemy over there who wanted a souvenir. Anyway, his ears were missing when they found him—just a few days ago, it was—and they had to use a basket for the rest of him. These machetes are bad stuff, as you know well enough."

Yes, Curt did know, and it compressed his lips and dug grooves in his forehead. Not that he was afraid of the same thing happening to him, for he'd never had trouble handling native labor.

He said little the rest of that day. By midnight he'd succeeded in pushing thoughts of the offer from mind, and was about to write out a refusal, when Lee slippered into the room, pulling her robe about her.

"It's all right, Lee," he told her. "I was just about to answer them. Anyway, the world won't come to an end. We're making out all right here."

And then, womanlike, Lee reversed herself. Children, she'd been reminding herself, were born and raised in Tierra Libre right along. This offer meant too much to Curt. She couldn't hold out.

"Oh, Lee, you're a—a regular guy," was all Curt could say.

Early in the morning he wired his acceptance to the C. A. T. people's New Orleans office. Back came, overnight, a contract for signature. And things moved fast.

The freighter *Pisces*, one of a small fleet of Norwegian vessels chartered to the C. A. T. outfit, would be held over a day in New Orleans awaiting them. Loaded with rails, cement, lumber, machinery, it was bound for Cabeza de Negro, the new C. A. T. port at the mouth of the Rio Negro.

Curt had less than twenty-four hours to wind up all his affairs in the States, store the car, arrange for care and lease of the house through an agent, for forwarding of their mail. . . .

Their mail! The first batch, readdressed and sent by air to New Orleans, caught up with Curt just before they sailed. Too busy with details of baggage and boarding ship, he hastily stuffed the handful of letters into his pocket.

It was hours before he thought of it and hauled it forth for inspection. The ship had reached the mouth of the Mississippi; they'd dropped the pilot and were headed out into the Gulf. One letter was a small plain envelope, postmarked Puerto Soledad, Tierra Libre. Inside was a brief note: *"Mr. Curtis. Don't bring your family to San Alejo, don't come yourself. Don't come! Zora Mitchell."*

Chapter Two

"DON'T COME!" But here he was with Lee in the curve of his arm, Buddy and Chuck tugging at his trousers, with Tierra Libre rising up out of the morning sea, the buildings of Cabeza de Negro taking shape. His arm unconsciously tightened about Lee.

Long before they drew close enough to make out details of the sturdy new docks and receiving-sheds, they saw the motor-launch cutting along the coast as though to intercept them. It too was headed for the port, and at last Curt recognized the figure standing in the cockpit.

He yanked off his hat to wave it wildly.

"Jerry, you old muckle-head," he shouted. "I might've known you'd come down to meet us."

"Yeh, got your wireless you were coming through Cabeza. Hiya, Curt. Hiya, Lee!" called the stocky man in the launch. "It's good to see you folks again. Where're the kids?"

Curt and Lee each picked up a child and stood him on the broad rail. Buddy, from his new vantage-point, piped up: "Mummy, what's a muckle-head?"

"A muckle-head, darling," she answered gravely, "is your Uncle Jerry, down in the little boat. See? Wave to him!"

There was no opportunity for dallying here. The launch drew away, and by the time the *Pisces* warped up to the dock, Jerry McInnis—leathery face, close-cropped hair, and weather-stained clothes—was waiting for them.

The two boys were awed into wide-eyed silence by the commotion and strangeness about them: Teak-colored men and women were selling brilliant serapes—imported from Mexico. There were wicker cages of little green parakeets for sale, or wicked-beaked macaws flaunting brazen colors. Native tots the size of Buddy and Chuck, pot-bellied and naked as the day they were born, sucked on lengths of sugar-cane.

A dockhand delivered a message from Señor Montaya on a company briefhead. The Señor had been delayed in getting downriver to meet them but would reach Cabeza in another hour or so.

Curt lifted his eyes, glancing about for a radio shack.

"Right," grinned McInnis. "No halfway measures here. They've as good a wireless set-up as we have, though apparently for their own use. I mean, they're not entering into commercial competition with us."

"Cheapest communication for them, I suppose."

"Sure, you know yourself a telephone line across these marshes would be out of the question; it'd have to be restrung after every flood. They have a line now from Tempujo on to San Alejo—Tempujo's their upriver port across from our Riverbend Junction. Prior to that they used radio, as they do at Cabeza now. And is their San Alejo station a darb! More powerful than ours at Soledad. Talk with Europe, Asia, anywhere."

"That one of their river boats?"

"Yep. They have two. But we can talk later, Curt." He scooped up the children, one in each arm. "Let's find a more comfortable spot. . . . Lee, you're looking great! Hard to believe these are yours. Marta sends her love and can't wait to see you."

He led the way from the dock to the one main street of the town. There were signs of recent construction. The new company was booming the village.

"That's a good dock they've built," Curt said. "Looks as if they're really going it big here."

"And how! They pushed their railroad from Tempujo to San Alejo more than a kilometer a week. And meanwhile were building San Alejo with materials flown across the swamp by two freighter planes. You've got yourself a job, Curt."

"They must've sprung up full-fledged."

"I'll say! One day we caught them throwing up temporary buildings at Tempujo; the next day heavy materials were coming in through Soledad. We had the facilities. They shipped to Riverbend over our lines, and ferried across the Negro. They still have a transportation office over in Soledad, but most of their stuff's coming in through Cabeza now."

Associated Fruit Growers—where Curt and McInnis, fresh from M. I. T., had their first years of practical engineering—stretched along the north bank of the Rio Negro, a hundred kilometers or more of banana plantations in an almost unbroken line. These were fed by a narrow-gauge railroad, and there was one handling of fruit from farm pick-up platforms to conveyor belts at shipside.

But the new Compañia Agricola Tropical, south of the Negro, had more of a problem. It wasn't possible to run a railroad through to the sea. Salt marshes lay between their concession and the coast and made it necessary to handle fruit by rail from farm to river port, and by steamer or lighters from there to Cabeza, where ocean vessels could pick it up. Not so good, two handlings of perishable fruit. Materials, too, must be reshipped by river steamer, and such handling slows the work and runs up costs.

"Well, here we are."

McInnis stopped before a small cantina, the front of which in the raw sunshine was a blinding, bilious green. McInnis put the boys down, led them inside. Lee and Curt followed.

"It's nearly lunch-time," McInnis remarked. "Shouldn't the kids be fed, Lee? You know what the cooking is like here, but we can probably get canned soups."

Lee smiled.

"I don't need a brick wall to fall on me. Go ahead, you two. Have a drink. I know you have plenty to talk over. I'll drag out my rusty Spanish and get along."

The men turned to the bar at the other end of the room, mounted uncomfortable stools and ordered drinks of the native bartender. There were no other customers at the moment. Said Curt, while the drinks were being mixed:

"Jerry, it'll cost so much to produce and ship fruit here that I don't see how these people can hope to compete with Associated. Not without a subsidy, and Tierra Libre doesn't grant subsidies."

McInnis grunted. "Well, that's their business."

"Of course," Curt mused on, "it's a pretty slick *hombre* who could put anything over on Old Man Moore. I could give even money the Old Man figures they'll go broke getting into production, then plans to bid in and take over the concession cheap. Maybe throw a bridge across the Negro and handle the fruit once from pick-up to the dock at Soledad."

McInnis grinned, but said nothing. The bartender placed the drinks before them, then left for the kitchen.

Alone, now, and with a furtive glance to be sure Lee was preoccupied with the children, Curt pulled forth Zora Mitchell's letter. He spread it open before the other, and his face was serious, his voice low.

"Jerry, what've I got into?"

McInnis read the note, refolded it, slid it back to Curt. He frowned. He took a long pull at his drink.

"All right, Jerry, out with it," Curt said. "What's up?"

"Well, Curt," his friend said finally, "my reason for coming down the coast to meet you wasn't altogether social. But now I'm here, I have my doubts. There's nothing I can put a finger on." He paused.

"Come on, pal! Spill it!" Curt urged.

It came out slowly and hesitantly: "Well, Curt, I can't help feeling there's something fishy about your new outfit. They have more men on their payroll than we have, for instance, Americans as well as natives, trying to get things set before the next rainy season. That's all right. But Soledad's the only live spot—such as it is—within their range. You couldn't call Cabeza a satisfactory place to liven a fellow up over a holiday.

"So—well, damn it all, you'd expect that gang to come to Soledad once in a while. But no one ever does. The two Swedes and the Dutchman I told you about are the only ones who ever get to Soledad, and that's only on business, to supervise receipt of shipments.

"And they don't talk! We tried to get up a ball-game with your people once. No go. It's as though this Montaya was afraid his men'd spill something to our advantage. And that's carrying the rivalry theme a bit far. I—well, you see how vague it is, only a *feeling*."

Curt reflected. He pushed his glass around in circles on the bar. "Ever get over to the new planting yourself?"

"No," grinned McInnis. "That wouldn't be good etiquette. The Old Man paid them a courtesy visit once, but we're rival outfits. If I went over, they'd think it snooping. All the dope I've had on them is picked up from natives. You know how stuff gets around.

"And that leads right into what I really came down here for. It was especially to—uh, warn you. Don't ask me against what. I don't know."

He held an uncomfortable silence for a moment. Then:

"I got hold of a rumor after you called me several days ago. There's no evidence, mind you, and it was too late to stop you by cable. Well, the natives working for me have their own ideas about Mitchell's death. They say it was no native did the job, but a couple of white men. But Curt, you know no white man would hack a guy to pieces the way Mitch was found."

Curt thought this out.

"Unless it was to hide the fact that it *was* a white man's killing. And suppose it was a white man, Jerry, or a couple of them? So what? Old Mitch knew his job, but he certainly piled up enemies. You and I know that well enough. He made engineers out of us, first job out of college, but we got plenty bruised in the process. Men with less sense of humor couldn't have taken the treatment he dished out. You didn't give me any details, Jerry," he mentioned after another moment.

"There aren't many. A trackwalker found him early in the morning—fortunately, before the buzzards did. Let's see, the 11th, it was. About a kilometer outside of Tempujo, in a ditch by the track. The damn' *zopilotes* were wheeling overhead, so he got the section handcar, loaded the body onto it—"

"The 11th?" interrupted Curt. "That's the date of their letter to me! They didn't waste any time. Wonder how they picked a man so quickly?"

"Well, the date's correct. I remember because we had an early evening dinner-dance on the *Tekla* at Soledad the night before Mitch was found. And the *Tekla* pulled out for Cristobal about nine P. M. on the 10th."

"It did!" exclaimed Curt softly. He looked at McInnis. "Their letter to me was dated the 11th, but airmailed from Cristobal on the 12th. Didn't notice that discrepancy at first. When I finally did, I figured the letter either made a plane to the Canal Zone, or was misdated in error."

"We have no air service to Panama from Soledad—direct. Course, it's less than two hours by air to the Zone, but I doubt they'd make the flight just for a letter. Anyway, I know a messenger from Tempujo brought mail to the *Tekla* just before it sailed. Came as our party was breaking up and going ashore."

"Then the chances are the letter to me, dated the 11th, was put aboard the *Tekla*, which sailed on the 10th—actually mailed before Mitch was found murdered. Right?"

"By God, Curt, that's so!" McInnis brought his palm down on the bar. "Mitch was killed some time after dark on the 10th and discovered early on the 11th."

"Meanwhile—" Curt fell silent, then looked up keenly. "The two Swedes are white men."

McInnis frowned. "And there are plenty more white men where you're going. No, Curt, the Swedes are not what we'd want for bosom pals, but we've no right to jump to conclusions. Besides," he dropped the scowl and grinned, "I did some checking up myself. Had my motorboy ask questions here and there. The Swedes made the run from Tempujo to San Alejo late that afternoon, while Mitch was staying in Tempujo overnight."

Another silence fell. Then Curt spoke harshly.

"Jerry, there's more here than meets the eye. If Mitch's killing was a grudge payment, then, Tierra Libre being what it is, there's little we can do about it. Nothing, in fact. And there's nothing for me to worry about. I don't make enemies the way Mitch did. But if there's more behind it—"

McInnis heaved a sigh.

"Curt, be careful! Don't mount any white charger over Mitch. He asked for it. He's been asking for it for years. And you've got Lee and the kids here now. But if—well, I don't have to say it, but if you find you're in a spot, call on me."

They downed the last of their drinks and swiveled to face the room. But before rejoining Lee, Curt brought up another matter.

"By the way," he said slowly, studying his friend's face, "I saw a destroyer headed for Soledad this morning. American, I suppose—looked like ours. Any particular reason for it?"

"Hell, no. The country's quiet as a church meeting. Dr. Areca's a dictator, sure, but a good one. Seems to be what the people need; they're satisfied. He's solidly entrenched, too; there's no opposition to speak of. Too, we had a Navy visit only a couple of weeks ago, and they certainly aren't scheduled to stop in again so soon."

"The vessel was making time, Jerry." Curt spoke earnestly. "Even Lee noticed that. I told her it was the wind off Point Cauca that laid its smoke flat. Sometimes I think fast," he chuckled mirthlessly. "But I'd damn' well like to know why it's calling at Soledad—and in a hurry, too."

McInnis stared.

"Curt, I wouldn't know," he answered solemnly. "For some time Uncle Sam's been good-will-missioning these countries down here to death—Navy, Coast Guard, Air. Part of it no doubt is in keeping a weather eye open for Canal defense—routine observations. But there's no trouble in Tierra Libre," he insisted, "—that I know of."

They started across the room to rejoin Lee and the boys. McInnis dug his fingers into Curt's arm.

"See Zora Mitchell, Curt, first thing when you get to San Alejo. But only to find out if you have anything personal to guard against," he said insistently. "Don't borrow trouble. You're a family man now. What's more, the family's right here with you."

"Yeh, I see what you mean," Curt answered dryly, his eyes on Lee and the children.

Chapter Three

McInnis shoved off in his launch for Puerto Soledad at once.

Taking over the small mountain of bags and trunks from Jerry's grinning launch-boy, Curt found a tan-uniformed customs man ready to inspect the luggage.

The man's movements were jerky ones, birdlike, and the job was done quickly. He scarcely lifted the top layer in each piece of luggage, then marked the lot as inspected.

"You have a gun, of course? A pistol, revolver?"

"Sure."

"The make and caliber, please? The serial number?"

The inspector gave Curt a temporary permit until sanction for the automatic could be had from the proper police official, then with a bow whisked himself away. It hadn't been the casual inspection of a friendly official, but a hasty job where there was no need for haste.

On the dock it took the combined efforts of both Lee and Curt to keep the boys out of mischief. They were at everything at once, not excluding an unfriendly baby ocelot hitched by a ragged rope to the bare leg of its owner.

Presently a downriver boat snuggled into its berth with the ease of a ferry, and gave a pair of toots delicate as a French railway train's as the gangplank was wheeled to the vessel's side and the job of berthing completed.

SEÑOR MONTAYA was unmistakable—tall, erect, wearing faultless whites, a crisp Panama on curly black hair. Straight from the ship to the little group he came.

"My sincere apologies, Mr. Curtis, Mrs. Curtis!" He spoke with very little accent, though the timbre of his voice betrayed his Spanish origin. He made a deep bow to Lee, held out his hand to Curt. "I have been more than busy since—ah, Mr. Mitchell's unfortunate happening. You have discovered by now the reason I need a new chief engineer, no?"

"Yes," answered Curt dryly, relinquishing the other's hand. "I learned the facts, naturally, before accepting your proposition."

"But of course. From your friends in Puerto Soledad, no? I suppose I must ask pardon for not myself telling you of Mr. Mitchell's—ah, demise. But one doesn't try to interest a man on the one hand, and on the other warn him off."

"Hmm," thought Curt, "a smoothie."

"I will say," Montaya went on, "that I didn't expect it would influence you—ah, contrarily. You know conditions here. I have had most excellent reports on your—ah, social adaptability, your ability to handle labor. That was Mr. Mitchell's failing."

Curt cleared his throat. "Yes," he answered mildly, "so your letter said. But your offer followed so closely on the heels of Mr. Mitchell's murder that I couldn't help being curious at so quick a selection."

Montaya's eyes gave the slightest suspicion of a blink, but his come-back was prompt enough.

"I must say the—the incident wasn't entirely unexpected, Mr. Curtis. I was prepared. I had had before me several names for some time."

Curt's immediate impression of the man he had to deal with wasn't one of heartiest respect. Not only did Curt like a man to look him in the eye, but he liked to hear a spade called a spade. Though to be quite fair, he reasoned, this might come about in Montaya's case from use of a language foreign to him. Apolonio Montaya was a suave gentleman whose bearing, as well as his speech, showed considerable culture. Curt knew that some sections of Latin America seemed to run to classical given names—Diogenes, Aquiles, Laertes, Apolonio; while other sections ran to religious names—Innocente, Jesús, Concepción. But it would be a mistake to infer a man's nationality from his given name. And Señor Montaya, while a free talker, said little that was revealing.

Lee took the boys in hand, holding their interest by the selection of gigantic gaudy straw hats for them from stock piled a dozen high on a vendor's head, while Señor Montaya led Curt on a quick survey of the docks and facilities here. In the sheds, two items instantly caught the eye—two boxes forty feet long, ten wide, and quite thin for these dimensions. Curt cocked a brow at them.

Montaya said briefly, "Spare wings. We have two planes. One of them was tied up for weeks once by a damaged wing, so now we have spares on hand."

"I heard you've had considerable use from your planes."

"Yes," was the monosyllabic reply.

"What make are they?"

It was a conversational question. It would have made no difference one way or another what Montaya answered; yet the question brought a sharp, quick glance from eyes that were beady black here in the gloom of the big receiving shed—and a rotund vagueness in reply.

"American planes are good ones, there is no doubt," Montaya said. "However, I was able to get second-hand equipment from Europe more cheaply than from America. And since it answers the purpose—" He could shrug a fine shoulder, this man. "That is the principal reason for stocking parts ahead of possible emergency. You understand, of course, how the war makes transportation, even purchase of parts, very uncertain."

"Of course," murmured Curt. "But," was his mental reaction, "if the man doesn't want to talk, he doesn't have to."

One end of the *bodega* was piled high with barrels bearing the stencil of a well-known chemical firm. Curt paused before them, looked them over with interest. Lime, eh?

"So you treat the soil before planting?" he asked. "Overacid, I suppose, from centuries of flooding."

A frown definitely stamped Montaya's forehead at this, but was immediately chased away by a smile that showed even white teeth.

"That, Mr. Curtis," he replied smoothly, "is a question that would come under the head of chemical research. We have a chemical expert, Dr. Toenjes, from Amsterdam. If he likes you, he may be willing to answer your question. But I wouldn't count on it," he said, with another flash of teeth. "Dr. Toenjes is quite jealous of his theories, which I expect will produce more and better fruit than Associated across the river."

As Curt was turning this over in his mind, Señor Montaya pulled at his lower tip—a lip unusually red even for his swarthy skin.

"It would be well for me to say something now, Mr. Curtis," he continued, his words falling precise and clear. "I have secured the best men available for the salaries I can pay in each line of work. All I ask of each man is to produce results in his own field. This is fair enough, no? If problems arise which overlap into another department, those problems are taken up through my office. I do not encourage shortcuts between departments.

"I expect you to work along with us in this fashion. You are responsible for the engineering work assigned to you, just as Dr. Toenjes is responsible as agricultural superintendent, just as Mr. Lannestock is responsible for aviation and Mr. Ryden for transportation."

"Lannestock? Ryden?"

"Most of our contract employes are Americans. These two are Swedish. I brought them here as pilots. But we no longer need two full-time pilots. As Mr. Ryden proved himself capable in transportation matters, I have given him charge of that department."

CURT had a long-established habit of fiddling with his pipe when mulling over some point that needed thought. He suddenly discovered he'd been stuffing it during this polite harangue. He now lit up, expelling a huge cloud of smoke before he said mildly, with a smile:

"All of which is by way of telling me to mind my own business? Well, that's all right. You've hired me for the engineering end of your venture, and that's where my interest lies. I'll try to curb my wandering curiosity."

Señor Montaya eyed him a moment.

"I am quite sure we shall get along, Mr. Curtis."

They took a quick look-see in the port office, Montaya introducing Curt casually, then returned to Lee and the children, seated on their pile of luggage. The boys' leashes were on them again, much to their audible disgust.

A pair of quick toots now came from the river steamer that had been loading all morning, even as the *Pisces*

docked. The baggage was hauled aboard; the little party followed. As they headed slowly upstream, Señor Montaya made his guests comfortable under a deck awning.

"I am glad you have children," purred Montaya. "I like children. To be frank, that is one of the reasons I selected you, Mr. Curtis. I find family men are more—ah, dependable, better workers, easier to get on with."

Lee, amazed, caught Curt's eyes. "Stuff!" outlined her lips. Curt knew Montaya hadn't made a hit with Lee, for all his fine Latin manners. Her reactions to people were much like his own.

To Montaya he said casually: "I suppose there's no reason why you shouldn't say who recommended me to you?"

"No, none," admitted his host. "It was Mr. Mitchell."

"Mitchell!"

"Yes, himself—though perhaps unknowingly. I will explain: Many times I had to warn him about his attitude toward the men under him. Of course, I—what do you say?—ah, yes, I hounded him to get the work done, for we have much to do before the rainy season, and it has not gone too well. But certainly I did not want him to antagonize the workers.

"One can—ah, drive some men, others not. It is a fine point to know how far one can go with workers. When I saw the many enemies Mr. Mitchell was making, I thought: 'But this is unfortunate.' I feared an—accident. So it was happy for me that I led him into talk of competent engineers. You were one he mentioned above others."

"But," Curt wondered, "you hadn't much time to investigate me."

"I investigated you along with other prospects sometime ago," said Montaya, "when I saw the trend. Though Mr. Mitchell's recommendation would have sufficed." He set down his glass with a sigh, and spread his hands. "Ah, it was sad about him, yes. A fine engineer. I did not like to lose him."

TWO hours of fighting the current upriver, and they found at Tempujo another modern dock, with a long floating stage built to allow for the rise of the river in floodtime. Now, with the river at low point, the shore works towered high above them. Their baggage was swung upward in a cargo net, a deck-hand riding the hook to avoid the stairs, while Curt and the others climbed the long flight of steps from the floating stage to the landing above.

Spread before them, on the only rise of land for miles along this side of the river, was a small town built arrowhead-fashion around a fan-shaped railroad terminus of storage tracks. Beyond was a landing-field and open-walled hangar, used now not to shelter planes overnight but to store pipe, cement, lumber—the heavier materials.

Buildings at Tempujo were of frame construction, roofed with corrugated iron. Residences and the mess-hall-clubhouse had as much screening as solid wall space. All perched five feet off the ground on creosoted piles rising from cement floors, for tropical countries are infested with insects, and quick-flooding downpours and the heat make a space under houses essential for dryness and comfort.

The color scheme was yellow and the picture here presented a neat one. Palms, flowering trees, shrubs, had been planted generously and were thriving. Hedges were covered with blossoms.

Montaya pointed out a centrally located bungalow. "Your Tempujo office, Mr. Curtis. There is sleeping accommodation there for you. There will be nights when you are unable to get back to San Alejo."

There were no streets here, only footpaths, for no wheeled vehicles were necessary in this small village. These paths were wide, high-ridged for drainage, asphalted. Montaya led the party to where two motorcars stood, automobiles with flanged wheels to operate on the narrow-gauge railroad tracks. Side windows of the sedan bodies rolled completely into the framework, making them all-weather cars for this variable climate.

Each car had its motorboy, but these two went on ahead with the baggage in one car, while the others followed in the second, Montaya driving. Off they sped across flat, uninteresting country, spots of it burned over. The railroad was quite straight for several kilometers, the railbed rough, and the resultant jolting brought comments from Curt.

"We had to push the road through in quick time," Montaya explained. "Our ballast had to be floated down the river on barges, but now that our rails have reached the mountains, where we have a gravel pit, the roadbed is being leveled. You will find the upper end in better condition."

Curt recognized section-markers for division of the flats into farms. Thousand-acre farms, he estimated. In the distance evolved a haze he knew to be the Quebrado Mountains, but thus far he'd seen no signs of planting. Far off on his right was what appeared to be a tremendous salt-field, but he knew it couldn't be that. "Lime," went his thoughts, "laid by airplane before planting. Sure, the scientific approach."

It took forty minutes to reach San Alejo, and as Montaya had promised, the latter part of the ride was smoother. They passed three section-gangs at work on permanent ballasting, one gang cribbing a fill with interlocking bars of reinforced concrete.

San Alejo sat prettily on an outjutting hump of the range a full thousand feet above the flats, and the railroad took to sharp curves and steep grades in climbing to the town. Slanting down from the summits above was a pipe-line, indicating a reservoir. And limned against the sky from the backbone of this line of hills were the towers of the San Alejo radio station, the station buildings squatting between the lacy shafts.

Señor Montaya preened himself. "A good site, no? The whole year there are winds that sweep across this face of the mountains in late afternoon and evening, but never does the wind come up from the old swampland. The result? We are happy to have no malaria here where we live. This makes the señora more comfortable, no?"

He pointed as the car rounded a curve and the town came into fuller view.

"You see that long, low building? Our hospital. Larger than we need, perhaps, but it is more better to be prepared. Across the plaza is our clubhouse. That building of two stories which looks out over the valley from between, it is our administration building. The ground floor is commissary, where the señora can get anything she needs. We are very proud of San Alejo."

"Reason to be," grunted Curt. "Good layout."

"So we think, too. There is nothing to break our view. In back of the club we have the swimming-pool, the tennis courts, also the schools—three of them, for the different ages of the children."

AND now the car took another curve that brought into sight the farther down-slope of Mt. San Alejo. Below, about a kilometer from the town, was an exceptionally long, cleared field, with a broad well-worn strip down its length. A branch of the railroad led to it around the base of the mountain. Curt now remembered the switch-back at the foot of the grade, but had supposed at the time it led only to the gravel pit. At that point the rails ran past a thick stand of manzanitas.

"Good-sized field," Curt commented. "You've several buildings besides hangars."

"Yes." Just the one word.

"But is that a *fence* I see around the field?"

"Your eyes are sharp, Mr. Curtis. Yes, the field does have a fence. Our chief pilot nearly lost his life during his first month here because of a native's mania for souvenirs. We had not thought to properly protect the planes. It is a serious thing to risk one's life in the air, Mr. Curtis, so I felt I should put a fence around the field."

Curt saw a flash behind the living-quarters. "Swimming-pool?"

"Yes, a small one. I do all I can to keep the men contented. It is much worth the cost; it pays well."

At the far end of the field was a sizable copse of trees, and Curt wondered that they should be left standing within the field. Before he could see more, however, another switch-back of the climbing railroad lost the field to view. Then the motorcar, laboring up the grade, came out onto a level stretch, picked up speed, and at once they were in the heart of the small town.

"It is late," Montaya was saying. "You have yet to unpack and get settled. I will take you to your house now. I trust, señora, that the cook and house-servant we furnish you will prove satisfactory."

Lee made a vague sound in reply.

"In the morning," Montaya turned to Curt, "if you will come to my office at eight, I will spend the day with you. We shall—how do you say it? Buckle down to work."

The sidewalks were not wide enough for the group abreast. Montaya walked ahead, carrying the two children, whose shoes made smudges on his spotless coat. The boys were silent with this stranger. Lee wrinkled her nose in distaste at his faultlessly tailored back.

"Ha!" she murmured. "Look at him, the dark lily!"

"Sh!" Curt tightened his hold on her arm. "He may have ears," he whispered.

"Well, I don't care," she muttered resentfully. "Look how he carries the kids. He likes children? I laugh!"

Montaya deposited the boys carefully before a hedge of plumbago, opened the wire gate, smiled them through onto the neatly scythed lawn where a mango, a fast-growing tree, already offered some shade to lawn and house. He was about to turn away with a gallant lift of his hat, when Curt mentioned Mrs. Mitchell for the first time.

"We were close friends with the Mitchells a few years ago. It must have been a terrible blow to her," he said. "I think we should express our regrets as soon as possible."

"Ah." Señor Montaya pulled at his lower lip. "It was a most terrible shock to her, Mr. Curtis." He cast a glance at Lee. "I—ah, had not meant to speak of it before the señora, but to be sure, she will have to know. Mrs. Mitchell—ah, committed suicide only yesterday. From grief. This morning she was buried. A sad affair, yes. That was what delayed me."

Curt managed a blank face to hide the disturbing shock, but Lee was frankly astonished. Not until Montaya was out of hearing, however, did she exclaim:

"She never! Zora Mitchell commit suicide? Not Zora! She wasn't the type. Besides, she never cared that much for him."

"She never seemed to," admitted Curt slowly. "They were a cool enough couple."

He turned to the house. Absently he held Lee's hand as they climbed the steps. But his free hand, in his pocket, was crushing Zora Mitchell's note.

"No, she never seemed to," he repeated, half to himself.

Before going to bed that night, Curt burned the note. But the words were burned into his mind.

Chapter Four

EVERY day was a new day at San Alejo, fresh and cool and clean at dawn no matter what the blazing sun might later do. Even the asphalt underfoot was toned up by the dew as Curt swung along for his early appointment with Montaya. Curt's mind should have been toned up, too, by the tangy air so much like an autumn morning at home, but his last words to Lee just now—he'd read the pucker between her eyes—were still in his ears.

"Don't you be worrying about Zora Mitchell," he'd told her. "I admit suicide doesn't sound like her, but we hadn't seen her for six years and that length of time will work changes in any of us."

"It was her little girl I was thinking of," Lee had answered him soberly.

"I'll find out about her."

"Yes, time works changes," thought Curt, as he headed for the plaza, "but it doesn't often reverse character so late in life."

This bothered him. So far as old Mitch was concerned, he wasn't the first white man in Tierra Libre to get what was due him, and there seemed little use in speculating over whether it was a native killing, as Montaya would have had it, or a couple of white men, the native rumor McInnis reported.

But Zora's suicide was something else again. There was something here that didn't add up. Curt's words to Lee had been a blind, he hadn't really felt them. Zora had been anything but the hysterical type, and she'd never given an impression of utter fidelity and love toward Mitch. Yet who would say what shock would do to a woman? Especially one left with a small child.

Circling thoughts! Curt shook his head in disgust. Then the company buildings surrounding the square claimed his attention.

Modernized Spanish façades, colorful with tiles and grille-work, lent an air of grace to the conventional layout. Advantage had been taken of old trees here, as well as among the residences he'd just left, for shade and effect. More had been planted. The plaza itself was bright with beds of cannas, calendulas, zinnias. Curt nodded appreciatively. Yes, Lee would like San Alejo, and this was mighty important. She mustn't regret coming. She'd consented for his sake.

Only the administration building here was of two stories. The ground floor was a well-equipped department store. Entrance to the general offices above was up wide, tiled stairs rising from a courtyard where olive trees gave a kind of dusty color. Here was a decorative well-head, orange trees in huge glazed tubs, potted geraniums scattered about.

Curt made his way to Montaya's office, a high-ceilinged room paneled and furnished in unvarnished whitewood. An impression of coolness was heightened by Venetian blinds and a grass rug.

Curt came to the point before Señor Montaya could broach business. He said, suggestively: "The news of Mrs. Mitchell's death was a considerable shock to us—to my wife and me."

Montaya looked at him in silence as though the words needed elaboration.

"I mean, we should hardly have expected suicide of Zora Mitchell, especially as she was leaving a small child."

"Nor did I expect it." Montaya made this statement as a sort of admission. He fumbled among papers on his desk, bringing forth two large square envelopes. Apparently he'd had them ready.

From one he spread several photographs before Curt. They showed, from different angles, Zora Mitchell slumped over in a bamboo "peacock" chair, her head at a curious angle. There was a bullet-hole in her left temple, and blood had run from the wound, coagulated, stained her dress.

Her left hand, hanging over the arm of the chair, held a gun Curt recognized as a Luger. "A Luger!" he thought instantly. "Queer. Where'd she get that?"

He recalled how Mitchell had always favored a Colt .45 against all foreign makes of small arms. In fact, Curt had been in on one bitter argument in camp years ago when Mitchell endeavored to uphold the superiority of his Colt over a Luger, a Mauser and a Webley, in a shooting match.

Another question forced itself on Curt's mind: Why hadn't the physical shock relaxed Zora's fingers and made her drop the gun? He became aware that Montaya was speaking.

". . . . best to photograph the scene. We discovered her in the early evening, and there was no time to bring

a Government medical examiner from Soledad. In this country, as you know, bodies must be buried before noon on the day after death."

Curt nodded, but his eyes still clung to the photographs.

"Now, in the case of her husband, we had no chance to obtain photographs on the ground. The body was moved to Tempujo. But we did the best we could. I had sketches made."

From the second envelope Montaya spread out these sketches, and with them a map marked with an *X* and two photographs of the body as it lay on the flat handcar.

"An inquest was held, of course, as in the case of Mrs. Mitchell. Both—ah, incidents were quite properly handled by our local police. We have a *comandancia* here, another at Tempujo."

"No trace of his murderer?"

"What would you?" Montaya shrugged. "We have nine thousand natives at work here. There is a constant small turnover. Did you ever see a native without his machete? No, never. The man who did it probably—you say?—cleared out immediately. These natives would not have the courage or the—ah, subtlety, intelligence?—to remain on the scene. We shall never know who did it."

The sketches and the map were valueless, but the photographs. . . . Curt picked up one of them. The picture was sickening, the body slashed and mutilated beyond recognition. Many of the cuts were clean, however, and something about these clean cuts rang a bell in Curt's mind. Yet the reason didn't at once click—that cuts which didn't bleed had to be made after death, after the blood stops coursing in the body. Curt was remembering McInnis' words: "Someone must've wanted a souvenir." Yes, the ear on that side was gone.

UNRECOGNIZABLE. A thought flashed: Curt looked for the hand. Ah, yes, there it was, the right hand with the little finger missing. An old wound. The dead man was Mitchell, all right. Curt had been with him when that mutilation occurred. It was when both worked for Associated.

Mitchell had been pawing over some mahogany railroad ties furnished by a local contractor. A scorpion had stung him on that finger, and though Mitchell was a hard-boiled egg, he had his superstitions. Seizing a machete from a laborer close at hand, he hacked off the finger before Curt could stop him.

"Hell," Curt had told Mitchell, "it wouldn't have killed you. Maybe paralyzed the arm for a couple of days."

"Yeh?" had been Mitchell's phlegmatic rejoinder, as he wrapped the stump in his handkerchief and made for his motorcar.

This incident was vivid in Curt's memory as he stood looking at the photographs of the dead man. He put them down.

"What about their little girl?" he asked. "Only five, isn't she?"

"Ah, but it is sad about her. Poor little thing! We have her at the hospital for the present, where the nurses can look after her. I am trying to get in touch with relatives in the States."

Montaya stacked the photographs and sketches, replaced them in their envelopes. He drew from his pocket an oversize cigarette case and tamped against the lid one of the special six-inch Turkish cigarettes he used. Apparently he was considering some problem.

At length he said, picking his words, "It would be natural for you to want to see the murderer of Mr. Mitchell brought to justice. But I assure you everything was done that could be done. You may believe me, Mr. Curtis, it would be a waste of time for you to try where we have failed."

Curt stared. "Oh, I'm no sleuth," he said.

"Just so, Mr. Curtis. Although, as you probably guess, I pay the salaries of the local constabulary, they are responsible to the civil authorities and are rather jealous-minded. Then it is understood the matter rests in their hands?"

Again Curt stared before he managed, "Oh, quite."

"Splendid. Besides, shall I confess to a selfish motive? If—*if*, I say, we have been mistaken and the murderer is still about, then he is a more clever man than we think. And if you should interest yourself in the case, you might perhaps invite a similar fate, no?"

"Is that a threat?" thought Curt. "It has the earmarks. Or a warning?"

Montaya put an end to the subject with an apologetic flash of teeth. "I cannot risk that. Engineering work is behind schedule. I need you so very badly, Mr. Curtis."

THE next hour was spent in meeting key-workers of the general staff, persons with whom Curt would have frequent contact. There was Montaya's secretary, ruby-nailed, compactly coiffed. There was the dyspeptic auditor who must take off his pince-nez with deliberation before he could acknowledge the introduction; the appropriations accountant, smacking of the Midwest; the native telephone girls whose English, if faulty, was at least charmingly so.

It was a whirlwind tour. The bulk of employees, numbering fifty to sixty, were Americans, with a sprinkling of Britishers and other Europeans. There were, too, a few upper-class natives. Just about the layout Curt expected to find.

Then said Montaya: "This is the best time of day for you to meet Dr. Toenjes. Later he is likely to be in the field." Using a handy phone, he called for the laboratory, and when he got his connection spoke in French.

"French?" queried Curt, as the other hung up. "I thought the name was Dutch."

Montaya smiled perfunctorily. "Oh, Dr. Toenjes also speaks Spanish and English—after a fashion. He is more successful with French. You do not, then, speak French?" As Curt shook his head, "I thought not. He will use English with you."

The Agricultural Department occupied an adjacent building, filling a corner left by the administration building and the hospital. Montaya pushed on through the outer office, vacant except for a young man typing cards, and on to a door at the rear.

In the huge working laboratory there was shelf upon shelf, and row upon row, of carefully labeled boxes and jars. Along one side of the room a number of steel filing-cabinets stood in a straight line. On the work-tables were odd-shaped vessels—alembics, glass funnels, retorts.

Dr. Toenjes, below medium height, in a dirty linen laboratory smock, proved a colorless individual. Indeed, with his full-bearded face and careless dress he looked more like a congenial farmer. Near-sighted, he wore thick-lense spectacles which gave him a bug-eyed appearance.

The first words were a conventional greeting. Then:

"Your shipment of—ah, chemicals at Cabeza aroused Mr. Curtis' curiosity yesterday," Montaya said. "I told him such questions were your special province."

Geniality left the bearded face. Hostile gray eyes bored through the thick lenses into Curt.

"You ver vonce with der beebles across der riffer?" asked the Dutchman.

Curt nodded, smiled. Montaya's deprecation of the doctor's English hadn't been an exaggeration.

"Six years ago. I know Panama disease has shown up with them and that they've tried a lime treatment for it. It was a simple question I put. The quantity of lime landed on the docks—"

"Ah, *ja*. It is trruth I use der lime—but alzo der oder chemicals. Vat I use is my zegred. Der banana plant vill be der more healthy and vigorous from my chemical treatment of der soil, und so ve combat der fungi more better as yet. Den vill ve haff der reechest planting in Tierra Libre."

Curt said nothing to this, and Montaya put in suavely:

"This valley has been inundated every rainy season for many centuries. The alluvial deposit and decayed vegetation is from twelve to fifteen feet deep at any point. We have the richest piece of land in the country. And as you know, bananas are heavy feeders. With irrigation during the dry season and Dr. Toenjes' efforts to ward off disease, we expect to produce more and better fruit than your old friends north of the river. In fact, we shall have to, if we are to offset the added cost of handling here."

THERE was no doubt, from the beetling glance he threw at Montaya as the taller man spoke, that the Dutchman was a suspicious soul.

Was this, then, the reason for all the secrecy around here, Curt asked himself, the stringent rules, no questions allowed, no short cuts between departments, no social exchanges with the Associated men?

If Dr. Toenjes did have a miraculous cheap compound for soil treatment, something to allay the dreaded fungus disease, something with which Associated could rejuvenate their used lands, then there was good reason for guarding the secret.

"You still haff frriends ofer der Negro vith Associated?"

The amusement in Curt's eyes was a better answer than his words.

"I'm working for this company now, Dr. Toenjes. I shan't be peddling information to them. Anyway, they've been in the business for a good many years. I doubt that our competition will alarm them."

The trend of the interview, Curt's feeling that Montaya was exhibiting him to the Doctor, a certain indefinable deference in Montaya's attitude toward the Dutchman, convinced Curt that whatever the dumpy, bearded man had, he'd sold Montaya on it pretty solidly.

At last, as final courtesies were being said, the worthy doctor let down the bars. He asked with what could best be described as a cunning look, "You blay gribbage, *ja?*"

"Cribbage?" Curt laughed. "Sure, I know the game."

"Goot. We blay sometime, *ja?*"

Montaya explained as they left the laboratory:

"Dr. Toenjes' one regret here is that he has no good opponent at his favorite game." He smiled politely. "He is very good at it. I hope, Mr. Curtis, you will be able to stand up to him."

Curt chuckled. "If I can't, I'll sic my wife onto him. She can play the game backwards and forwards."

Their final stop was the engineering office, a one-story structure, square like the laboratory. It occupied the corner between the general offices and the clubhouse, thus completing the layout of principal company buildings about the square and balancing the community center.

Here Curt was introduced to his own staff. It was now midmorning. Three draftsmen were at work, two at detail drawings, one on maps. One room was reserved for the field men when they came to San Alejo to submit their progress reports. There was a dark-room, and a big vault containing records and master maps. From photostatic machine down to electric erasers the equipment throughout was ultra-modern.

Curt's own office was airy, light, cool, with both desk and big table on which to spread out his papers, a swivel-chair between, a handy upright rack for rolls of blueprints. But the one thing which instantly grabbed his attention was the huge aërial photographic map of the C. A. T. tract permanently framed against the wall. Here was something!

Montaya led the way across the room, to tap proudly with his fingertips. "Here is the one thing I owe the most for getting the planting under way."

This map showed a rough triangle of about twenty thousand hectares, or fifty thousand acres. The Quebrado Mountains formed the western boundary. Along the south and east flowed the Masica River, joining the turbulent, unruly Rio Negro, the northern boundary, just below the rise of land where stood Tempujo.

No buildings and no engineering work showed on the map. It had been made before any preliminary work had been done. But it gave Curt an instant picture of the entire project; of the drainage necessary to clear the huge swamp, dotted with stands of jungle; of the levees necessary to hold back the rivers; of the best terrain for spur tracks to feed the farms.

"The Negro is a wild stream that requires taming," said Montaya. "We work on that now. Along here," he indicated with a pointer taken from a rack beside the map, "we make a twenty-three-foot levee. Your most important job, Mr. Curtis, is to see that it is completed within the next five months. On that I gamble eight thousand acres of planting!

"The Masica will hardly worry us this year. In fact, since the—ah, unfortunate happening to Mr. Mitchell, I have halted work on the Masica levee and put those machines on the Negro levee. Flooding of the Masica will not endanger present planting.

"Along this line," he indicated with the pointer, "is our main canal. Already it has drained several thousand acres. Here will be secondary ditches. But we have so much to do, yes, so many laterals to dig. The canals in the upper half of the tract must also be completed before the rains come. Now, we have four draglines and a three-yard shovel and six thousand laborers at work on the engineering projects."

This wasn't even the beginning. More and more Curt realized he'd stepped into a man-size job, with people who knew what they wanted and how to go about getting it.

"Who made this map?"

"Mr. Ryden and Mr. Lannestock," was the answer. "In a plane I chartered especial for the purpose. A year before I was ready to start work. It takes long to secure a concession, to plan. It is good work, no? They are competent young men. That is why I am so happy now to have them under contract.

"*Bueno.* Here are progress reports on the Negro levee, the main drainage system, and the railroad. You will wish to look them over, but you will be brief about it, no? Directly after lunch we shall start on an inspection tour of the valley. For this we shall need the rest of today and tomorrow, so you will bring what personal articles you need for overnight. In the meantime, I have much to do myself."

Curt hardly noticed Montaya's departure. He even forgot the worrying puzzles in the background of his mind. What a job! The best equipment to work with, a challenge to meet, with the next season's rainfall the deadline. He swelled to the task, his eyes shone. He could have stood for hours before that map. Noon rolled around all too soon.

ON his way home to lunch his step was springy as a boy's. As he let the gate slam behind him, Buddy and Chuck jumped from ambush behind the hedge. This brought about a free-for-all on the lawn until the resultant bedlam made Lee, watching from the screened living-room veranda, put fingers to her ears.

"Hey, Man-mountain!" she called to Curt. "You're worse than the boys. You know better—they don't. We have neighbors, remember."

Curt snatched up the youngsters to march inside.

"Lunch ready? I'm starved."

"Yes, but you!" She eyed him sorrowfully. "Look at you. Your only fresh whites! You look like a street-cleaner on a rainy day."

Curt chuckled and pulled her to him.

"Well, you didn't marry a matinee idol. Anyway, I won't need these again for a while. I'm making the first round this afternoon, so get out my boots and field clothes. And pack my old musette-bag for overnight. Won't be back till sometime tomorrow."

During lunch Curt was full of the job ahead of him, but the meal was nearly over before he realized Lee hadn't

been listening with the proper enthusiasm. He paused to give her a chance.

"About Zora Mitchell, Jeff," she began.

"Yes." Curt set down his glass of iced tea, carefully. "I saw photographic evidence this morning. They took pictures when they found her. I reckon it's pretty conclusive." He tried to speak lightly.

She was silent a moment.

"But her child, so little and all alone. I kept thinking all morning what if it were Bud—" Lee bit her lip. "Don't you think, Jeff, we could take her until arrangements are made to send her north?"

"A swell idea, Lee! I should've thought of it myself. They're looking after her at the hospital nursery. I'll speak to Montaya this afternoon." Then, "Lee, how well do you remember Zora Mitchell? What I mean, do you remember if she was left-handed?"

"Why, no, I don't remember that she was." Lee knit her brows. "I've sat across from her at bridge many a time and I don't remember anything unusual about her dealing. I think perhaps I would if she had been left-handed. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing." He tried to make it sound casual. "Just wondered."

Lee's steady gaze was disconcerting. Curt glanced at his wrist-watch and attacked his meringue. There was no point in worrying her with the questions troubling him.

Chapter Five

CURT reached the San Alejo station before Montaya did. His khaki breeches, though just unfolded from his trunk, bore stains no soap could remove; his boots were scarred, his battered hat faded and spotted from sun and rain. A .45 hung loosely at his side—not that he expected to have use for it, merely as precaution. A bulging musette-bag that had seen much service was slung over his shoulder. So was a pair of field-glasses.

First sight of Montaya swinging down the path to the station brought a chuckle to Curt's lips—and a curl to them. Lee's epithet, "The Dark Lily," popped into mind. Montaya's swarthiness was highlighted by his impeccable white whipcord breeches and gabardine coat. His shining boots were black; so was the flowing tie, the silk handkerchief, the band on his broad-brimmed Panama. A special job, that Panama. He might have stepped from the pages of a fashion magazine except for the silver-trimmed carved-leather cartridge-belt and holster—black, to be sure—that was tied to his leg to prevent it from slapping his thigh. He carried a neat black briefcase which Curt surmised held overnight necessities.

Sartorial perfection was by no means unusual for the *gente* in these countries, and certainly it was in character with Montaya. But Curt—he brought his chuckle under control in time to greet his employer with a grave eye.

He kept his promise to Lee, raising the subject of the Mitchell child before they set out. Montaya knit his brows, selected one of his long Turkish cigarettes, fished a lighter from his pocket.

"Your former acquaintance with the Mitchells," he finally said, "is no reason for you to feel responsibility toward the child."

"We're not making the suggestion out of duty," Curt replied, a bit shortly.

Montaya dropped his eyes, flipped the lighter, touched the flame to his cigarette.

"It would be a great deal of trouble to Mrs. Curtis," he murmured, exhaling.

"Not at all," Curt answered. "It's her idea."

Montaya studied the ash forming on the end of his cigarette. Why so much deliberation, Curt wondered, over so simple a matter? At length Montaya spoke:

"I have been unable yet to locate the relatives. According to our records there are only two—sisters of Mrs. Mitchell, and they—ah, travel in theatrical work. It will take time to make arrangements. If Mrs. Curtis will be so kind, then. The child is not happy at the nursery."

He phoned the hospital from the station. The little girl was to be taken to Señora Curtis at once. Then he and Curt set out on their tour of inspection, using the motor-car which was to be Curt's own. Again Montaya drove.

As they rolled down the mountainside Curt had a better view of the airfield than from the unexpected glimpse of it the day before. There were two hangars, he saw, separated by an adjoining shed roof. Before one stood a bulky-looking plane, obviously built for freighting and general utility work, not for speed or fancy flying.

Again today Curt noted the length of the field, but at once realized a long runway was necessary for heavily loaded planes. His eyes traveling down the wide strip caught a glimpse, but hardly more than that, of what seemed a duplicate set of buildings at the far end. They were shaded by the big copse of trees left standing there, but at that end of the field the grass had grown, and there was no runway. Evidently these buildings were not in use—at least as hangars.

However, along the barely visible front of the buildings ran a breast-high platform, and serving this platform was a spur track leading from the airfield branch. Curt would have missed the platform if the tracks hadn't suggested it.

"A *bodega?*" he asked, and before realizing the impertinence he was offering: "Funny place for it."

But Montaya was not offended. He gave a short deprecatory laugh. "We all make mistakes, Mr. Curtis. That is a—a monument to my—ah, fallibility. Before my planes were delivered and my pilots arrived, I put up the buildings you see at the far end to be ready for the planes. The materials I hauled around the mountainside from river steamers unloading at the upper end of our tract. A difficult work, those buildings.

"My reason for locating them where I did was to take advantage of those trees for the comfort of the men; it is so very hot on the field. Then arrived my aviators. They showed me that the wind is bad for that location. And the wind here never varies much. So I built new hangars at the upper end of the field, the site they selected."

"And the old buildings?"

"I will tear them down when I need the materials. Meanwhile, they serve as a *bodega*. I have some choice stocks of rosewood and hard mahogany curing there. And ciruelillo. Also much pipe and pump machinery which I was able to pick up very cheaply in bankrupt sales—one must save where one can—for the overhead irrigation system we install later. I shall send you the inventory for your perusal."

On the run to Tempujo, Curt's mind dwelt on that stock of material. The idea of overhead irrigation was developed on paper when Curt worked for Associated a few years ago. Now, however, he'd be in on the practical end of it.

He visualized the huge network of pipes, with the standpipes rising to forty feet throughout the many square miles of plantations. And at their tops the long nozzles to revolve and throw water over three-hundred-foot circles to simulate rain. Curt had been intrigued by the plan.

Twice on the run Curt stopped Montaya to inspect the work of ballasting in progress. On the second stop, where a crew was cribbing a section of the roadbed and installing a culvert, he found the engineer in charge was a man he'd known previously in Tierra Libre—a lanky, happy-go-lucky individual named Bill Henderson, with a mop of sandy hair burnt from his unwillingness to wear a hat except in the hottest sun.

"Hiya, fella!" Henderson grinned amiably. "Heard you were coming."

"So, Bill! You finally broke away from Associated. You threatened to often enough."

"Well—guess it was the other way around, Curt. They broke loose from me."

"How come?"

"Oh, reckon I went on one too many benders."

"What! Have they gone Sunday-school on us over there?"

"No, Curt, but I cut up a bit one night."

"Oh."

There was something decidedly peculiar in Henderson's manner, in his careful words. Lord, the man didn't have to be on good behavior with Curt! He'd never been so restrained in the old days. Perhaps Montaya's silent presence threw a damper on the meeting. Curt commenced to stuff his pipe absently.

"Didn't get in any serious trouble, did you?"

"No." Henderson grinned feebly. "But they kinda thought a change of scenery might do me some good."

"So you crossed the river! How you doing now?"

"Oh, I've been off the stuff for some time."

"Shake on that, Bill." Nothing wrong with his grip, thought Curt, wincing. "Tell you what: when you feel the urge again, look me up before you start in. I'll see you don't go too far. Anyway, we'll have to have a get-together soon for old times' sake. Come up to San Alejo. Lee will be glad to see you again."

"Sure, Curt; thanks."

Inspecting the job in hand, questioning the capacity of a culvert, passing a few more words, took twenty minutes. Montaya took little or no part in the talk. Once Curt noticed the Señor looking attentively from him to Bill Henderson, but gave it no thought.

On their way again, Curt said: "Damn' good worker, Bill Henderson. Only fault is, he never could leave liquor alone. He can usually handle it, but it does him out of a future."

Montaya shrugged noncommittally.

"Much drinking here?" Curt asked.

"No more than one would expect to find. I won't permit it on the job, of course; but a man's private life—" He shrugged again.

THEY reached Tempujo by midafternoon. From here they'd take a power-launch up the river to the main levee camp; but first, Montaya led the way down the ridged asphalt footpath to the Tempujo engineering office.

Half of this building, all one side of it, was a single large room with almost continuous windows in three walls. Here were engineering instruments neatly shelved, drafting equipment, and rolled prints of all sizes in cradles and racks. Curt's desk occupied one corner. An intelligent-looking native, at present tracing maps, was in charge of the office. Lauriano Duro bowed stiffly when introduced, then went on with his work.

While Montaya selected a couple of maps to take along on their trip upriver, he explained: "We maintain a duplicate set of our important drawings here, Mr. Curtis. This serves two purposes, convenience and insurance against fire."

The other half of the building was further divided. A screened porch in front was a combination living-room and outer office. In back of this was a small bedroom, and through an open door on the other side of the bedroom Curt could see a shower cubicle.

"This you will find most convenient when your work holds you at this end of the planting," Montaya remarked. "You use the mess-hall for meals."

Curt grinned. "Good enough!" They thought of everything here.

The old Tempujo radio shack at the river dock now housed the dispatcher and his small switchboard that served Tempujo. Here ended the two phone-lines from San Alejo, one used by the dispatcher, one for general utility. They still maintained the radio, too, against emergency. Montaya entered this office to talk with San Alejo before leaving for the levee camp. Curt strode about outside.

The dock hoist was lifting a huge case from the deck of a river steamer—one of the crated airplane wings Curt had seen in the wharf shed at Cabeza.

Rising up over the edge of the wharf, it loomed even bigger than Curt had thought, bigger than necessary for the plane he'd seen on the ground at the airfield that afternoon. Then he remembered there were two planes in use here. But both were alike, Montaya had mentioned, as a matter of economy in servicing and replacing parts. The sight of this spare wing, the thought that here was an organization which wasn't going to ask miracles from faulty equipment—well, here was a job after his own heart. . . .

The Negro rolled swiftly even at this season, obliging the launch to fight its way upstream. When they reached the ever-moving camp of the levee gang, it was too late to go out on the job that night. After a wash-up, Montaya and Curt busied themselves with maps and progress reports in the office tent until darkness drove the construction gang into camp.

Again Curt found an old friend among these workers.

"Slats Monahan!" he called to a bulky man pushing his feet wearily down the camp road. "I'll be damned!"

"Hello, Curt! Glad you're on the job. It'll seem like old times again."

"Has all the old guard left Associated, Slats?"

"No. We've got a number over here, but I reckon you won't know many of 'em. Myself and Bill Henderson—"

"Yeh—met him."

"—and Steve Harvey, and Lawson—well, only us, I guess, from the old days."

Slats, naked to the waist, his dirty shirt slung across his shoulder, a filthy hat pushed back until sweat-soaked hair escaped in a tangle, showed strong tobacco-stained teeth as he smiled. But for all the friendliness of the grin, he seemed uneasy. And again Curt caught a speculative look in the Spaniard's eyes as he remarked: "Mr. Harvey and Mr. Lawson are on the drainage laterals."

To Monahan, Curt said: "Slats, how come so many of you left Associated?"

"Oh," Monahan replied rather hesitatingly, "they started pinching pennies, for one thing; and Señor Montaya pays good wages." Then, as though he hadn't said enough: "Besides, this is a new planting, and you know how most of us feel about a new job. It's more fun building than maintaining."

Curt's curious feeling about Monahan persisted all evening. However, until bedtime Señor Montaya steered the conversation skillfully along the lines of business, so Curt had little opportunity to speculate further. And he found himself paired off with Montaya for the night, in a canvas tent. There were comfortable cot beds on a raised wooden platform, mosquito bars—essential here—a camp-chair, a small table on which stood vacuum jug and glass.

Opening his musette-bag to prepare for bed, Curt's hand came in contact with the sharp corner of a bit of folded paper, apparently slipped under the flap without opening the bag. Curt pulled it out, unfolded it in the light of the lantern hanging from the ridgepole.

He read *"Curt, watch yourself."*

It was printed with pencil, in irregular letters, as though hurriedly. It wasn't signed.

Curt heard Montaya's steps. He palmed the paper, rummaged in the bag, found a bottle of quinine capsules, and as Montaya entered was washing one down.

Getting to sleep wasn't easy. Curt lay staring in the dark. Who had had an opportunity to slip that note into his bag? Henderson and Monahan, of all these men, knew that musette-bag of old. The note must have come from one of the two.

"Watch yourself." It tied in with Zora Mitchell's *"Don't come!"* warning. A string of suppositions flooded Curt's mind again, circled, and suddenly one shot off on a tangent.

Suppose Mitchell's murder had come, not from personal spite at Mitchell the individual, but at Mitchell the *chief*

engineer. Ah, there was something to think about! This murder of Mitchell—was it beyond Old Man Moore to hire the job done? Big business sometimes has few scruples when it comes to protecting or advancing its interests, especially in frontier work such as this.

On this new theme—was it Mitchell the man or Mitchell the chief engineer who was killed?—Curt finally fell asleep.

Chapter Six

SLEEP washes our minds. When Curt awoke in the morning, he did not remember at once the note slipped into his mustee-bag, but first sight of Slats Monahan dancing noisily under a shower outside his tent, brought it back with a rush. The shower was a crude arrangement, a tub punched with holes and fed by a *mozo* standing on a ladder. Curt, in breeches and boots, made for the mirror hanging near by and began lathering his face. Monahan dismissed the native and was rubbing himself briskly with a towel when Curt spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

"Keep your voice down, Slats, and don't look up at me. You touch my bag last night—put anything in it?"

"No. Why?"

"Somebody put a note in it warning me to watch out. Watch out for what, Slats? Any idea?"

"I dunno, Curt. Got anything to do with Chigger Mitchell's murder?"

"That's something I'd like to know. What about that murder, Slats?"

"Well, I dunno, Curt. They let out it was a grudge killing, and I kinda think it must've been. You know how Mitch was. Only—"

"Only what?"

"Well, Mitch had something on his mind. Last time he came out to the job, he stayed in camp overnight. He got me off by myself and began flingin' questions at me—"

"What kind of questions?"

"About the freight comin' upriver. Gosh, Curt, I dunno nothin' about the stuff comin' in. But Mitch was specially interested in a lot that passed through Tempujo a coupla weeks ago. I did see that. I was in Tempujo for the week-end, and Mitch was at San Alejo. These were big, heavy boxes that came to Cabeza on a Jap tramp. Like oversize coffins, they were. Eight of 'em, marked 'Pump Machinery.' They brought 'em upriver that Sunday, and hustled 'em on to San Alejo right away."

"Well?"

"Well, it seemed like Mitch was mighty burned up about it, like they was sneakin' stuff in behind his back. You know how Mitch was. He hated most foreign goods, and was death on the Japs and Germans especially. Nothin' would do him but good old U. S. A. stuff. But if Montaya wants to buy equipment without Mitch's okay, even cheap Jap pumps, I reckon he's got the right. It's his money—"

"Stick to Mitch."

"Well, Mitch asked a lot o' questions about Lannestock and Ryden. They're the two Swedes—"

"I know. What about them?"

"I dunno, Curt. I've played pinochle with them at Tempujo once or twice when they stayed over of a Saturday or Sunday. They're not exactly the chummy kind, but so far's I know, they're okay. But Mitch had some kind of bug in his head about 'em. Can't say why."

"Go on about Mitch."

"Well, there aint much more. He said he was sittin' on a powder-keg, and raved about Loring—you know—"

"Yes, yes," came impatiently from Curt.

Loring had been American consul at Soledad for years. He'd been appointed through influence of Associated Growers and was their man first and last.

"Well, what griped Mitch," Monahan went on, "was that Loring was the closest official an American could go to for help, and he wasn't any good. But don't ask me what kind of help. A guy 'that'd blow the lid off' was Mitch's words. Mitch complained that he couldn't get to the Canal Zone. Two-three times he muttered about how close we are to the Canal, yet not close enough for it to do him any good. 'Hell,' he was gripin', 'it may be a coupla days by coast, but it's hardly more'n a coupla hours by air.'"

"What do you know about Montaya?"

"Nothin' much, Curt. Except I wouldn't play poker with him on a bet. There he is now, Curt."

"Under your hat, Slats."

"Sure." Monahan finished dressing, and slouched away.

Breakfast over, Montaya and Curt accompanied the dragline crew to the job. Random, the engineer in charge, went along. No time was wasted getting down to work—machine crew, ground crew, trimmers, all jumping to it. The apparent richness of the soil which the dragline turned over was amazing—certainly all the Spaniard had claimed it to be.

Mules, good Missouri mules that could cover ground at a comfortable pace, carried them on an inspection of the levee along the river to its end. It was flat country they traversed, and the levee loomed high. Ahead, to the left, the Quebrado range stretched into dim haze. At the end of the river section of levee, the two men urged their mules up the steep embankment. Here was half a kilometer or so of open space between the river and the Quebrado Mountains. From the ridge they had a clear view south and east from the Negro, where the planting was progressing rapidly. Montaya waved his arm in a vast arc.

"We have planted about four hundred acres weekly," he proclaimed proudly. "When once this levee is complete, we shall step that up to eight hundred! This section here before us will be bearing by the time the rains come this year."

The banana plants, set twenty feet apart, were now from ten to fourteen feet high. Healthy, vigorous plants, as fine a new stand as Curt had ever seen. Maybe Dr. Toenjes really had a secret worth guarding!

In the distance Curt saw a plane flying back and forth, back and forth over the land, maintaining an even low height. Bringing his field-glasses into play, he saw that the plane was dropping from its tail a white something which formed a rapidly settling cloud.

"Ah," he thought, "Dr. Toenjes' precious formula. I could bet a month's pay it's straight lime in spite of all he says about his 'zegred' ingredients."

Noon found Curt and Montaya back at the point of operations. Curt pulled his mule to a stop; Montaya followed suit. The dragline was operating at a steady pace, dropping its giant clawed bucket, hauling, lifting, swinging, releasing its load with precision, and repeating. It made the efforts of the small army of natives seem puny and antlike by comparison; yet Curt appreciated their fine coördination as they trimmed and finished, and placed the mats for the forward march of the big machine.

As he sat there on his patient beast watching the operations, the bucket-cable snapped. Curt nudged his mount through the muck to the machine. Monahan was already rolling out another cable from the cab. Evidently this was a regular occurrence.

"What size rope you using?" called Curt.

"Inch."

"Have many breaks?"

"Too many."

"Why don't you use heavier?"

"Mitch thought it might jam."

"Let's see that break."

Curt was now at the machine. Monahan picked up the broken cable, hauled hard on it, lifted the end to Curt. This brought him close enough for Curt to say, under cover of the running engine:

"Slats, you used to visit with the Mitchells in Soledad."

"Yeh, that's right. Once in a while."

"Was Zora Mitchell left-handed?"

"Huh? That's a funny question. No, course not. Why? And what d'you mean *'was'?"*

Curt stared. "She committed suicide. Didn't you know?"

"The hell you say!"

"Three days ago. Night before I arrived. Shot herself in the left temple."

"*Shot* herself? Zora Mitchell? No!"

"With a Luger."

"Hey! Where'd she get a Luger? Mitch—"

"I know. Don't you get news out here at camp?"

"Only when we go to Tempujo on Saturday nights, or someone comes upriver, like you now. Why didn't you mention this before? Or Montaya?"

"Well, there didn't seem any good spot for me to speak out. And I supposed you knew. As for Montaya—" Curt reflected, then finished slowly: "I don't know's I can blame him for not wanting to spread such news himself."

More could have been said, but speaking of Montaya made Curt glance from the corner of his eye, and he saw the Spaniard urging his mule across the muddy ground.

Curt handed the ragged end of the steel cable back to Slats, pulled out his pocket notebook to jot down the item.

"Ready to go on to camp?" asked Montaya. His eyes said nothing, but they were leveled first on Monahan, the wire rope in his hand, then on Curt.

Curt nodded. "See you later, Slats. Use up what spares you have now, but order inch and a quarter in future. I'll see you get it."

The trip downriver to Tempujo was a quick one, running with the current. In the car going back to San Alejo they stopped but once—at the culvert and cribbing, on which Henderson's crew was still at work.

Curt wanted to talk with Henderson, but he needed a reason for stopping, and so he told Montaya he wasn't satisfied about the size of culvert being installed.

"It wouldn't take too much strain to wash out that fill," he pointed out. "Better to be safe than sorry."

"Mr. Mitchell passed on the size," the Señor remarked.

"And I have respect for his judgment," Curt answered. "Nevertheless, on work for which I'm responsible, I take no one's word until I'm satisfied myself."

The Spaniard elected, but reluctantly, to remain on the tracks by the car. At that level there was some current of air, while from below, heat-waves rose in a solid mass from the naked floor of the valley. Besides, his clothes were no longer so fresh and clean and this seemed to distress him.

Curt clambered down the steep embankment to examine the concrete pipe. He squatted on his heels, Henderson beside him, to make jottings in his little notebook. He measured the flume and hammered on it—an act for "the Dark Lily," for they were not many feet from Montaya. By lowering their heads, they could speak in tones that wouldn't carry to the man above.

Curt wasted no time. "You put a note in my bag yesterday?"

"Yes, Curt. . . . Look, Curt, I've got to have a long talk with you. But not here and now, not in front of Montaya."

"We'll manage it soon. Bill, Slats Monahan tells me Mitch was worried for days before his murder. That right?"

"Well-l, yes, Curt, he was."

"What about?"

"I—uh, don't know. He didn't let me in on it."

Curt considered, tried again.

"Why was he in a dither about getting to the Zone?"

Henderson looked startled.

"He wasn't," the lanky man said slowly. "He only—I know a fellow there, name of Collins, comes from my home town; and Mitch— Oh, hell, Curt, this is why I want to talk to you, to tell you just enough to keep you from messing around about Mitch's murder. I know you from way back when something dirty pops up.

"There's something rotten going on here, and Mitch was wise to it. So'm I, but I refuse to pass it on to you. You've got a wife and kids here, and you'll keep out of this. I know who killed Mitch, and why, but I couldn't prove it.

"Anyway, what's done is done, and it's no skin off your nose. You keep out of it, and I'll give you some damn' good reasons why, soon's we can have a talk. You leave it to me. I know what to do and how to do it, and there's nobody waiting for me with a candle in the window."

"It's no skin off my nose," growled Curt, "unless whatever did for Mitch is a danger to me by taking over his job."

"It won't be if you watch yourself—"

Montaya's feet, above, crunched on crushed rock as he tested a foothold for the easiest descent. Curt rocked back on his heels, made another note in his little book, then rose and climbed the embankment. Montaya was patently annoyed, but got into the car without a word.

Curt, his foot on the running-board, called down to Henderson: "By the way, Bill, try to get up to San Alejo this week-end. Come to dinner Saturday night and meet the kids."

For reply Henderson grinned and flung his arm in a vague salute.

As the car started up, Curt said: "I know the guy pretty well. If anyone can keep him sober and on the job, I can."

To this Montaya said nothing. Instead, he asked: "The culvert? Did you make up your mind?"

Curt thought he detected a note of sarcasm. "Not so casually," he answered in kind. "I'll have to study Mitchell's notes on floodwaters and valley drainage at this point."

Montaya regained his suavity in a few minutes and began to talk of the work in general and plans for the morrow.

"You have yet to go over the rest of the tract before getting down to work. I should like you to cover it tomorrow and the next day. Unfortunately, I shall not be free."

"It's a lot of territory," Curt said thoughtfully. "Would you use a plane? Is there a place to land on the flats?"

"No," was the snap answer to this. "It will be fatiguing, but you can do it by mule. The main drainage canal will take you one full day, and there you can use an outboard motorboat. You can catch the rest on the second day.

"That will bring you to Friday, no? Friday and Saturday you can study what you have seen; then we can get together—say Sunday? There is so much to be done, no time to lose."

"Sunday will do very well."

"I am giving you a—ah, a sort of secretary-bodyguard," Montaya went on, carefully. "But you must not be alarmed. I simply do not want anything to happen to you, Mr. Curtis, that is all. Engineers with your background in this work we do not find growing on bushes."

Curt waited.

"The man's name is Emilio Vargas. Tomorrow he will report to you. It is my wish that he go everywhere with you when you are out on the job. *Everywhere.* Please, Mr. Curtis, observe this closely. You will find him a competent stenographer, and quite helpful in relieving you of minor details."

Curt still made no answer. He commenced to fiddle with his pipe. A bodyguard for himself! That seemed to hint at danger to the chief engineer. Danger with its roots in business rivalry?

Well, there was Henderson's visit Saturday night to look forward to. He'd make the man talk, and talk plenty. Curt leaned back in his corner of the seat and relaxed for the rest of the trip.

IN the morning Emilio Vargas reported at Curt's office. He was a slick-looking fellow, with sharp features, olive-tinted skin, snapping eyes. He had pointed teeth, and perfumed pomade glued his black hair flat to his skull. A revolver, a fancy chased affair in a holster that had seen

service, hung at his side. From his mouth drooped one of the brown-jacketed native cigarettes.

Curt found Emilio a good guide and untiring in the saddle. Furthermore, the young man was as good at taking dictation—in English—as Montaya had said. So he was an asset. He was also company—of a sort, and for a day or two. But looking ahead to weeks and months in the field, Curt knew how irksome a bodyguard would become.

In the two days allotted to it, he completed his inspection of the engineering work throughout the tract. On the drainage job he met two more old-timers he'd known when with Associated. They were cut off from contact and hadn't heard of Zora Mitchell's death until Curt spoke of it. However, Emilio was close at hand, and there was no discussion to be had with either Steve Harvey or Herb Lawson, aside from matters of work.

Friday morning he settled down in his office to a study of maps and progress reports, hydrographic charts, and various data of his own hoarded from his tour of work north of the Negro a few years ago. Much of it applied here.

By noon on Saturday he was ready to start dictating memoranda to Emilio. This took three hours, during every minute of which the native smoked his brown cigarettes. Loosely packed, they burned fast, and ash flew about at the slightest breath of air. He ran through two packages of them in this time, and Curt marveled that the man was able to work with his right eye constantly screwed against the smoke which curled up.

First impressions, suggestions, questions of the work at last on paper and out of the way, Curt phoned Montaya for an appointment early on Sunday, then went home. It was his first breathing-space since arriving six days ago.

He played with the children for two hours. Curt took quickly to Zora Mitchell's small daughter. The shyness of her first few days had worn off in the lively company of Buddy and Chuck, and her loneliness for her mother was gradually fading. Lee had seen to that.

When it came time for the children's supper, Lee broke up the play in brisk fashion. She sent Curt to the shower, took charge of the children, and by the time Curt had had his bath and a cocktail, the youngsters were out of the way for the night.

"We'll give Bill Henderson one hour, no more," said she firmly, laying out a dress. "I've planned dinner so. Unless he's changed."

"Wrong this time, honey," Curt said cheerfully. "I'll bet you the evening at the clubhouse that Bill gets here in one piece and sober. I'll even dance with you without an argument."

Lee snapped him up on that. "It's a bet, and I'll hold you to it, Mastermind, see if I don't! I can get Inés to stay this evening, in case the kids wake up."

The hour passed and Bill Henderson hadn't arrived. Curt became gradually quieter during that time, fiddling unconsciously with his pipe. Lee knew he was puzzled and disturbed. . . . Finally they sat down to dinner alone.

The meal was not yet over when the phone rang. Lee answered.

"For you, dear," she said, one hand over the transmitter. Her nose wrinkled as at a bad odor. "The Dark Lily. And you're not to go back to the office tonight, you hear me? You lost fair and square, and it's my evening. We're going to the club!"

Curt frowned as he took the receiver from her. Montaya's words were crisp and direct.

"I have just been told from Tempujo that Mr. Henderson has had an accident. He is unconscious and sinking rapidly. As you are an old friend—"

"I'll be right along. You're going, of course? Can we use a plane?"

"Sorry, we have no lights at the Tempujo field for night landing. You can get to the station in five minutes. Dr. Berry has been notified—"

"I'll be there!"

Curt sprinted to the bedroom and returned buckling on his gun-belt. He grabbed up his coat and hat, gave Lee a flying kiss and explained on the way to the door: "Henderson. Accident. Tempujo. Be back when I get here."

Chapter Seven

BESIDES the mestizo driver in the car that clanked down the mountainside, there was Montaya, spotless as usual from freshly piped shoes to Panama; Dr. Berry, the American head of the hospital; a young fellow named Lister, carrying his camera, flash-bulbs and tripod; and finally, Curt.

Montaya was saying: "It would appear he was drunk—you know his failing, Mr. Curtis. So long as he did his job, I had no objection, but this—"

There had been a brief rain tonight, clearing the atmosphere. Though the airfield was a full kilometer away, on grinding around a curve Curt saw plainly the lighted swimming-pool and could make out tiny figures diving. Two other human ants were at tennis on the bright court.

Very little was said during the run to Tempujo, which took scarcely thirty minutes. They found Henderson was stretched out on an examination-table in the dispensary, in charge of Dr. Fisher, a newly graduated physician from the States. His chief duties at Tempujo had been dishing out quinine or bandaging minor hurts of the laboring force, and the present case seemed to be beyond him.

But so was it beyond his superior. Dr. Berry straightened up after an examination of only a few seconds, to shake his head.

"Hopeless," he said bluntly. "Both legs broken, and several ribs—at least five or six; a blow on the back of the head that has probably fractured the skull; the chest caved in, one lung punctured. It's a wonder he wasn't killed instantly—or that he's lived this long."

Bill Henderson was still alive, though unconscious, and frothing pink at the mouth in his racking efforts to breathe. He'd lost a great deal of blood. Young Fisher kept swabbing the lips clean with gauze.

"He can't last more than a few minutes."

Still about Henderson was the smell of raw whisky. Curt's thoughts were bitter. He'd seen so many men—good men, clean of heart—lose out here in the tropics because of drink. And only a few days ago Bill had said he'd been on the wagon for some time.

Also present was a lieutenant and uniformed aid from the Tempujo *comandancia.* Extraordinarily quiet and respectful, these two. Of the presence of death, or Señor Montaya? Curt was aware of them only subconsciously, however. He stared down at Bill Henderson. A severe blow on the back of the head, Dr. Berry had said.

An idea! Reaching out, Curt rolled back one eyelid of the unconscious man, then the other. One pupil was contracted, the other dilated; that was the concussion. But the whites were clear! Curt compressed his lips.

Inconclusive! A mild word for all these happenings. Mitchell's murder, Zora's suicide, now Henderson's accident—they could be this; they could be that; all the details had *double entendre;* no one item was clear cut!

Curt became aware of the surprise of the doctors, that Montaya was eying him closely. The two men from the constabulary had ceased whispering, to watch.

"How did it happen?" asked Curt bitterly.

Dr. Fisher gave them the story. Henderson lived at Tempujo in the same building which housed the young doctor, a bachelor quarters. It was a sort of hotel for the single white men working here. Fisher knew that Henderson had shaved and showered after coming in from work, then changed into whites; that he planned to run up to San Alejo.

"He asked me if I wanted to go along," Fisher said. "But I couldn't, not having arranged previously for relief. I don't think he'd had a drink at that time, which was as he went to the shower-room."

However, doors were never locked here, and were carelessly left ajar more often than closed. Passing Bill's room later, after Henderson had gone, Fisher had noticed a half-empty bottle and glass on Henderson's table.

"That was nothing to wonder at," he said. "I thought nothing of it at the time."

From there on Fisher had to reconstruct the unlucky man's movements. Henderson first went to the dispatcher's office for an okay on his trip; that much was fact. But the track wasn't clear. So Henderson drove to the end of the yard, threw a switch, and backed his motorcar onto a siding to let the incoming train pass on into the yard. Then the track would be clear for him.

Apparently his drinking had befuddled his brain sufficiently so that he'd forgotten to throw back the switch. The incoming train, a locomotive and three flats, took his siding and plowed head-on into the motorcar, telescoping it, throwing its engine back against Henderson.

"Fortunately," Fisher ended the tale, "he never knew what hit him."

"Never will know," added Dr. Berry as the bubbling wheeze stopped—simply stopped. Dr. Berry lifted a wrist, shook his head, flung a sheet over the body.

Young Lister had by now got his pictures here. The others followed him soberly out into the yards while he took pictures of the wrecked car, now a mass of junk. There was nothing more to be done, so the four men headed back to San Alejo.

On the way, Montaya continued to smoke his long cigarettes. He seemed angry, bitter, brooding, frustrated. About halfway across the flats he spoke out.

"There is no excuse for this kind of accident. There is no excuse for drinking to excess. More than once I have thought of establishing a rule that any employee becoming drunk on the grounds shall be let out at once. But I can't do that. I could not hire enough non-drinkers to handle the work. So I am caught—what is your saying?—I am caught between the devil and the sea."

No one answered.

Suddenly Curt remembered the two khaki-clad police representatives. Did their whispering and note-making constitute an "inquest?" Was this the kind of inquest held in the cases of Mitchell and his wife? More than likely, he thought. Without a doubt Montaya "owned" the police, and it wasn't to his advantage to stir up any fuss.

ON his return, Curt told Lee about the accident without dressing up the story. Gave her the simple facts without the gory details. She was silent for some minutes.

Then, "Jeff," she said quietly, "I'm no fool. What's the answer? This is the third death by violence here in less than three weeks!" But he countered:

"What's strange about it? There's always drinking and sometimes sudden deaths among construction workers in a place like this. You know that. It was so in the earlier days of Associated across the river."

He reached for her hand, pulled her closer to him.

"Nothing's going to happen to me," he declared. . . .

There was a Catholic church at San Alejo, and a small nondenominational chapel; between them a burial ground. It was here Mitchell and his wife now lay side by side. Service was said over Bill Henderson's body early Sunday morning, and he was lowered into the ground.

Lee clung close to Curt during these last rites, and Curt could feel her trembling. She dabbed at her eyes and turned homeward as Curt went on to his office, where Montaya was to join him for their first major discussion of the engineering work Curt had taken over.

While waiting for the Spaniard, Curt pawed over in his mind this chain of deaths. All three were so apparently what they seemed to be—a grudge killing, a suicide from grief, a drunk's accident. Yet there was that telltale coincidence among them. All three victims had known something. There were, too, a few details which just didn't fit. They haunted Curt.

One was the fact that Montaya's letter offering Curt this job was written *before* Mitchell's body was discovered by a trackwalker. Another, not only was Zora Mitchell very definitely not a neurotic type, but where would she get hold of—in the Mitchell household—a foreign make of gun? *And,* though it was not out of character for Bill Henderson to have taken a drink, *it was certainly out of character for Bill to forget that switch even if he'd been rolling drunk!* Bill was a railroad man!

Curt's thoughts harked back to Mitchell. What was it the man had "known?" He'd done some muttering about sitting on a "powder keg." He'd also done some muttering about the Canal. Did Mitch suspect danger to the Canal? Was that the "powder keg?"

Walking in at that moment, Montaya raised smoothly clipped brows as he saw Curt's congested face.

"I was only thinking," said Curt, in violent explanation, "what a damn' shame it is that liquor can't be outlawed."

"I quite agree, Mr. Curtis," said Montaya gravely. "I will not permit drunkenness among my key men at any time, on the job or off, as you know from your contract. Of course, among construction workers—" He shrugged.

"But let us get to work. You have not had much time with your so charming family since arriving. You will want the day with them. I have gone over your memoranda carefully—"

One of Curt's suggestions had been to bring in some additional draglines and bulldozers, and to speed up the work in two shifts per day, using floodlights for the few hours of darkness they'd overlap.

"Two shifts of work, it is a good idea," Montaya agreed. "As for more equipment, I have two three-yard shovels now on order. They should arrive soon."

"You'll need more," Curt answered.

"But when the work for such equipment is completed? It will be a lot of money to have tied up."

"There's lots of work here for such machines. You're going to install overhead irrigation when the more important work is out of the way. You plan to pump from the rivers, but I can show you a better way."

Curt strode to the huge photographic map and picked up the pointer.

"Here is a considerable depression in the Quebrado range. The Rio Negro at this point is a good deal higher than our valley. We do not have free access," he admitted. "Cuts here and here would be necessary to connect these ravines leading into the bowl, and an earth dam would have to be thrown up here. Also, we'd have to bore through these hills in order to bring the water out to the valley. But—"

Curt's point was that a dam large enough to serve most of the valley by gravity could be carved out of the hills. It would need more earth-moving equipment, and Montaya held in his hand Curt's memorandum listing what he wanted. He looked at Curt with increased interest.

"But the cost of this equipment, Mr. Curtis!"

"I know where you can get some perfectly satisfactory second-hand machines at a fair price. What's more, you can have immediate delivery and get them here in two weeks or so. In my opinion, none of the work is progressing fast enough. We'll need everything we can put on the levee to complete it in time."

In the end Montaya agreed, and by phone, then and there, ordered the necessary radiogram sent to his New Orleans office. Other business followed, disposed of item by item. At last Montaya glanced at his watch.

"There are two men you have not yet met. Knowing you would be free at this hour, I asked them here. Sunday seemed a good time, not to interfere with the routine of anyone."

He opened the door to the outer office, nodded to someone outside, held the door open.

In marched two young men in freshly starched whites, punctilious and stiff of manner. They could be only the Swedes of whom Curt had heard mention so many times. Both were tall, both dark blond, with fair skin and blue eyes, both wide of shoulder and hard as nails.

There the resemblance ceased. One was round of face, with full lips that held a curious quirk in the corners. He had wavy hair. Not too strong a countenance, this. The other's face was square, with thin, straight lips, frosty eyes, and stiff, cropped hair. There was an old scar on his left cheek.

"Mr. Curtis, this is Mr. Ryden, who smooths out our transportation problems." Square-face bowed stiffly. "And Mr. Lannestock, our chief pilot." The other followed suit. Neither smiled.

Curt extended a hand but felt no warmth in their response. Palpably, they were ill at ease, and Curt presently put this down to their poor command of English.

"Flying always seemed an adventurous life to me," Curt said, by way of conversation. "Do you enjoy this sort of utility flying? Freighting, laying chemicals, that sort of thing?"

"It is a job," was Lannestock's answer. He had trouble with his "j."

Ryden was more voluble. "A good flyer likes any kind of flying. It is not always work. There was the map." He cast a glance at the big map on Curt's wall. "And the alligators."

Montaya explained:

"Before the swamp-land was drained of surface water, alligators were quite a nuisance. And yes, some danger. As fast as the clearing progressed, Mr. Ryden bombed them from a low altitude with grenades. Those that were not killed were driven down the rivers into the marshes between Tempujo and the sea."

A curious look livened Ryden's eyes as Montaya spoke. They took on a merciless slant. Lines of cruelty tensed his thin lips. The sudden transition hit Curt like an electric shock.

"Karl and Gosta," Montaya continued in a tone shaded with affection, "were invaluable to us when we needed two full-time flyers to freight materials. There is still much work for them to do. I could not get along without them."

"Planes have their uses," Curt admitted. "What make of plane do you use?" He'd asked Montaya this question before, and got no answer.

"They are old planes!" Ryden spat this out, with it giving Montaya a dirty look.

The Spaniard's teeth shone affably.

"Always they ask for new machines." He shrugged expressively. "But if the planes they have will fly, I cannot be putting several times the price into new equipment for this heavy work. They too become at once secondhand." Montaya patted Karl Ryden comfortingly on the shoulder and steered the conversation into other channels, mentioning the fatal injury of Bill Henderson the night before.

"They were good friends, the three of them. Karl and Gosta both feel Henderson's death keenly."

"Yes, good friends," Ryden dittoed.

("Like hell!" thought Curt on the instant.)

"The last time we see Bill was on Friday," Ryden went on. "Gosta and I, we stay in Tempujo overnight, and we three play poker. But Bill was too lucky for us. Then last night while we had tennis, we heard about the accident." He spread his hands deprecatingly.

The proprieties satisfied, Montaya put a period to the meeting, much to the young men's relief.

"You haven't visited the airfield yet, Mr. Curtis," Montaya said in parting. "You can telephone any time it is—ah, convenient, to learn if Karl or Gosta is there to show you about. If you play tennis, they will be glad to have a new partner."

The three men left. Curt settled back in his chair, hoisted his feet, reached for his pouch.

He'd asked a point-blank question, "What kind of planes are you using?" And though much had been said, the question remained unanswered. It wasn't answered the other time. Coincidence?

Chapter Eight

CURT'S preliminary study of the project was over. Now he faced the real work—days of it, nights of it, grueling work that would so tire body and mind he'd have no time to be annoyed over Montaya's circumlocution, the Swedes' uncompromising stiffness, Dr. Toenjes' suspicions.

Curt was a good organizer. He put his program on paper that Sunday night, at home, and made prodigious strides in the field during the next two days.

One big job was doubling man-hours on railroad work—ballasting the main line, the pushing of two spur lines to feed farms already planted or now being planted. Another was in putting all earth-moving machines and crews on two shifts a day, using floodlights hastily improvised. For this spreading of the work Curt had only skeleton crews at present, but more men were to be brought in. They were already requisitioned.

One thing, though, during all this intense effort, made Curt wonder, rang a bell in the back of his mind.

There were minor jobs under the chief engineer—farmhouses, wells and windmills, manufacture of concrete items such as culvert pipe, building blocks, reinforced girders and slabs to bridge farm ditches. All such things, which were of no great or immediate importance, were coming along at a fine pace.

But the really important things, the Rio Negro levee, the railroad branch lines to haul from present plantings to Tempujo three or four months from now when fruit should start to come in—these things had dragged! The drainage ditches, too, were far behind schedule.

Curt sometimes talked over his problems with Lee. Tuesday evening when the children had been put to bed, Curt was lounging on the darkened veranda, propped up with cushions, Lee in the curve of his arm. When he spoke, it was in a sober voice.

"Lee, I'm worried. No, not worried—puzzled is the word. There's something rotten going on here, and I don't know what it is. I'm afraid of stepping into something unaware—the way Mitchell might have. If I knew what it is, I could steer clear."

"Jeff, what are you trying to say?"

"Lee, I'm convinced those three deaths were no coincidence. That they were all deliberate murders. The second and third, I suspect, to cover up the first."

"I knew it! Zora Mitchell couldn't possibly have committed suicide! Not the Zora I used to know. But Bill Henderson? What you told me about his accident—"

Curt was silent a moment. "I know. It looked like an accident, sure enough. But Lee, last Wednesday Bill told me he knew who killed Mitch, and then refused to tell me anything more for fear of involving me. He pointed out my precarious position of having you and the kids here. Said he'd work it out himself, for me to keep hands off. Well, I was all set to get behind that on Saturday night, and you know what happened."

He felt Lee stiffen beside him, but she didn't speak.

He went on: "You didn't know—I didn't tell you; but Zora Mitchell sent me an urgent note warning me not to come to Tierra Libre, not to bring my family. I got it in New Orleans and like a fool didn't look at that batch of mail readdressed to us until we'd dropped the pilot and were out in the Gulf. Then it was too late to do anything about it. I kept quiet, not wanting to alarm you. I intended to talk with her first chance I got. But she—died."

He read fear in Lee's voice when she finally said: "Jeff, what are you leading up to?"

"I don't know, Lee, I don't know. But I've been considering: It may be that Bill Henderson knew who killed Mitchell, and why. That '*why*' is somehow important, from the way Bill stressed it. He was done away with before he could pass it on. Zora knew something, and *she* died. Well, these two deaths would seem to be for the purpose of covering up Mitchell's murder. Then, the crux of the whole business is *why* Mitch was killed. Was it really a personal grudge, or was it something deeper? Mitch was no fool; yet at the rate the work was going here, the coming rainy season would have flooded the whole valley again. The railroad and all the planting done this year would have been washed out! Well, if Mitchell had a contract like mine, and we can assume he did have, and if he was deliberately slowing up the work, then his death was very convenient for Montaya."

"Sabotage! You're advancing that as the reason? You think Montaya had him killed?"

"I don't say that, honey," Curt answered doggedly. "It simply seems a possible answer."

"Well," Lee replied slowly, "I know you don't like Señor Montaya. I don't, either. But that's simply personal taste on our part. We have no reason to dislike him, have we?"

"No."

"It's an ironclad contract you have, sure—for Montaya. There's an escape clause which would let him cancel the contract if you should turn out incompetent or unsatisfactory. Surely he could have got rid of Mitchell in a case of sabotage."

"Sabotage is difficult to prove sometimes!" Curt exclaimed. "For example, I've found Mitchell was making the dragline men use cables too slender for the job. They kept breaking. Every break slowed up the work a little more. There are many ways he could, or I could, slow up the work without enabling Montaya to invoke that clause you mention. And that clause isn't as elastic as you think. A court, in an ensuing breach-of-contract case against the company had Mitchell been let out, might have obliged Montaya to pay heavy damages. Not only for remainder of salary under contract, but punitive damages for injury to reputation."

"I see what you mean," Lee said slowly. "But no, Jeff, I can't see Montaya having Mitchell killed for any such simple reason. And two other murders, too!"

"One planned murder," Curt pointed out. "The other two were follow-ups."

"Darling," said Lee, "I can see your point in wanting to know more. But oh, be careful. Don't do anything that would put you in danger. I just couldn't bear it if anything should happen to you. And the children—"

He pulled her to him.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," he said, his words muffled in the thickness of her hair. "I'm no fool. I sha'n't stick my neck out. But I've got to know what's behind Mitch's murder—you can realize that!"

THE following day Curt took to the field again. He made a trip to the levee camp, saw his plans for speeding the work were coming right along, tried again to get Monahan aside. It was no go. But Vargas did have his uses. Not only did he relieve Curt of many minor details, but he kept an eye on his well-being, too. He saw to it there were lunches and vacuumed drinks when they'd be too far from camp or village. And on this trip, when Curt scratched his arm badly on a poisonous weed, Emilio was close at hand to drag out a first-aid kit. He also insisted on returning to San Alejo early, that the wound might be better cared for.

The flesh about the scratch swelled. Reaching San Alejo in the middle of the afternoon, Curt unloaded himself of musette-bag, field-glasses, pistol and cartridge-belt, as he piled out of the motorcar at the station.

"I'll go on to the hospital from here," he told Emilio. "You can drop these at the office for me. I'll see you in the morning."

Dr. Berry himself dressed the injury.

"The inflammation will be gone by morning," he prophesied. "The torn skin will heal in a day or two."

Leaving the Doctor's office, Curt took a turn in the corridor by mistake and found himself in the patio used by convalescents. Since he hadn't yet had a full look around, he decided to push on farther. The patio was squared by hospital and service buildings, open at the rear corners. Wandering out one of these openings, Curt found himself at the brink of a sharply descending ravine. From here he had a much wider view of the airfield than obtainable from the railroad. There were men on the field, and both planes were in front of their hangars.

He pulled a sour face at thought of the two pilots, but mused: "We're here together for a long time. If I can break them down, so much the better. Cost nothing to try."

He plunged down a rugged footpath leading into a more traveled pathway, and in less than fifteen minutes was at the wide double gates that stretched across the railroad tracks leading into the field. One gate was swinging ajar, and Curt pushed on in.

SEVERAL men busy some distance away hadn't seemed to notice his approach, yet word had carried. Before Curt reached the field office, young Karl Ryden came trotting around a corner of the nearest hangar, his square face congested with anger or annoyance, Curt couldn't tell which. Perhaps it was both.

Said Curt cheerfully: "I was at the hospital and the short cut down the hill was inviting. Should have phoned, perhaps, but I wasn't near one at the moment."

"It is all right," Ryden said stiffly. "We happen to be here today."

Lannestock came running up, wiping his hands on some cotton waste. He too was visibly put out by the visit. Curt ignored the scowl, tried another smile, extended his hand to Lannestock.

"Hello, Lannestock. Or shall I call you Gosta? We're all one family here."

Both Swedes bowed stiffly, uncertainly. Ryden was the spokesman.

"Of course, Mr. Curtis. We are friends here."

"Fine—Karl." He surveyed the two. "Repair work on the planes today?"

"Yes." Ryden snapped this out. He then flung some Swedish at Lannestock, who stood wiping sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his coverall. Lannestock nodded and made off for the living-quarters. Ryden spoke again to Curt.

"My friend will get clean. Then we have something to drink. Now you let me show you the plant."

Grouped behind the two hangars were the utility buildings, and it was to these Ryden led the way. The largest was a V-shaped affair, housing in one wing the office, in the other a six-room bachelor quarters for Ryden, Lannestock, and their principal mechanics. These wings were connected by a clubroom containing tables for cards and billiards, radio, phonograph, a small bar. Near by was another and longer dormitory building for the assistants and laboring force. A sizable staff was maintained here, Curt noted. There was a kitchen and mess-hall, a fine tennis-court, a swimming-pool.

"No wonder you men don't often come up to San Alejo," Curt remarked. "I wouldn't want to myself, with so many comforts right at hand."

"We are happy here," Ryden conceded, still unbending. "There is nothing we need except the cinema. For that we go up to the town."

Lannestock, dripping from the shower, emerged from his quarters with a towel about his waist and trotted to the pool for a quick plunge. This made Curt feel stickier than

before, and with Ryden still uncompromisingly stiff and formal, he began to regret the impulse that had brought him here.

But there remained the hangars. With Ryden clearly reluctant, Curt himself led the way. In front of each hangar was the plane it housed, with mechanics still at work on them. On one plane they were repairing the landing-gear, but the other machine was dismantled of cowling and propeller, and a new wing had been installed. The old one lay on the ground.

Curt puzzled. These were a make of plane quite unfamiliar to him, but after all Curt wasn't a particularly air-minded man. They seemed big, bulky, awkward things, Percherons of the air, built for hard usage. Each had powder-laying nozzles protruding from the fuselage well back under the tails. Thought of this powder led Curt's eyes to the shed-type structure between the hangars, which evidently housed the chemical for treating the swampland. The sliding doors were closed and locked, but the hard-packed earth before the building and in paths leading to the airplanes' loading spaces was white with the stuff trodden in underfoot.

Ryden was complaining blackly, apparently for the purpose of making talk.

"All the time we repair, repair. We get one thing done, then there is another. These planes are only junk."

"They look pretty sturdy to me," Curt said.

"Oh, they fly, but they are old. We need new ones. There is much work to do. But,"—he lifted his shoulders,—"Señor Montaya will not. The best he do is get a new passenger plane if we make these last for soil treatment."

Curt noticed floodlighting equipment.

"I see you can do night-flying."

"That is for emergency. We have never used it."

Curt turned back to the shed that housed the chemical, eyed it speculatively. Against his better judgment he was about to put a question, when a furious chugging and clanking of rails told of a motorcar racing around the foot of the range toward the field.

The look of relief that swept Ryden's face was not lost on Curt. In a few strides they were at the end of the building and saw a *mozo* swinging wide the gates so the motorcar would not have to stop its pace.

AS the car came to a grinding stop, out popped not the suave Señor Montaya, but Dr. Toenjes. His hair stood on end; his beard was the plaything of a thousand devils.

"Ah? Meester Coortis. A zurprise! I coom for vorrds vith Herr Lannestock, und find you. A plezoor." To Ryden he said: "He iss here, no? Herr Lannestock?"

"Yes. In his room making clean."

"Ah, zen I see him latoor. You like ze teengs you see here, Meester Coortiss?" Toenjes waved his hand vaguely at the field, the buildings.

"Very much. The men must be quite satisfied here."

He indicated the shed. "Your compound, Doctor?"

Dr. Toenjes turned his thick lenses on Curt. "Yess," he hissed.

"Efficient method of treating the ground," Curt grinned, "taking it in thousand-acre lots."

"Ah, yess. Eef Associated had so done before they plant, they would have ze reechest cutting efer known. Their land ees good, wizout ze sour from ze centuries of water."

"They're still cutting strong, Doctor," Curt said dryly. Then, as the Dutchman's eyes continued to bore through him he gave a short laugh. "Look here, Dr. Toenjes. Let's get something straightened out. This goes for you, Karl; and Gosta," he added, as Lannestock joined the group.

"You'll have to get rid of your suspicions of me. I'm no spy for Associated. I work for Señor Montaya, just as you do. His success is mine, and I'm certainly going to do nothing to undermine my own future. And get this: I didn't seek this job. The Señor sought me. Up to then I hadn't even heard of this planting. So you needn't be worried about my giving away your secret, Doctor."

The Dutchman studied Curt. "Ah, no, I am not vorry," he said at last. "For you do not ze zegred have. It has nobody but me, me alone, Meester Coortiss."

"Okay, that's fine. Then let's drop the bars and at least make believe we're friends. We'll be here together for a long time to come, like it or not. Anyway," he went on curiously, "you've less reason to be worried about me than about any one of your some thousands of farm laborers, who could easily steal samples of your stuff to sell to Associated for analysis."

At this Dr. Toenjes shook his head with satisfaction.

"Ah, no. Zamples from ze grround zey could get, but zamples from ze grround vould not vork out in laboratory analysis, Meester Coortiss. All zey find iss lime. My zegred ingredient, he is too quick absorbed."

Curt stared, then gave another laugh.

"Well, you need have no worries at all, then. You seem to guard the fresh stuff well at its source." By way of changing the subject he motioned to the far end of the field and the big abandoned hangars there.

"Too bad you couldn't have used the original hangars and had the benefit of that shade," he said. "Señor Montaya told me the story."

Nobody said anything to this, either, so Curt went on in a moment, rather irritably: "You should clear the grass from that end of the field. It's high and dry. Don't your engines ever spit fire? Couldn't your planes in landing or taking off fire that dry stuff?"

"We cut it regular. It is time again," Ryden conceded.

Dr. Toenjes suggested a drink, so they headed for the clubroom. Lannestock held open the screen door. They took chairs about a table and a native servant set before them tall glasses and bottles of schnapps. Only then did Toenjes become quite fully at ease. He could be affable when he chose. And he offered Curt a lift up the mountainside.

"You haven't taken care of your business with Gosta," Curt reminded him, adding maliciously, "the business that brought you to the field."

The Dutchman stared through his thick lenses. "Oh, yess." He spoke to Lannestock. "It iss about tomorrow, ze work for you. Coom to ze office; on ze map I show you."

The two were gone but a few minutes. Then Curt and the Doctor, in the latter's car, were on their way up to San Alejo.

This was the first time Curt had gone over the branch line to the airfield. It followed the field's boundary at first, then halfway down curved away to cling to the foot of the mountain. This necessitated a rather long spur to serve the *bodega* at the far end of the field. They had just passed this spur when there came a buzzing from the air which quickly grew in volume to a steady, powerful drone.

Toenjes stopped the car. Both men climbed out, squinting against the sun. They knew the C. A. T. planes were grounded, and in any case this sound told of a heavier ship—more than one, indeed.

Two huge planes dropped from a bank of clouds and circled low over the San Alejo field.

"Army planes!" Curt exclaimed at sight of the insignia on the wings. "Must be from the Canal. Well, why do they circle? Why don't they land or fly on?"

BUT the reason at once became apparent as a third plane came limping into view. One of its engines was misfiring. Something had happened and these two were hanging on to make sure of the third's safety.

The damaged plane settled onto the San Alejo runway, taxied to the upper end. Above, the two circling planes climbed, straightened out, and made off directly north.

"Headed for Soledad," said Curt. "Let's go back and find out what's wrong."

"Ja!" Toenjes wheezed, and scrambled into the car.

They found four men landed and the plane already surrounded by airfield workers. The newcomers were in United States Army uniform. One, the leader, was expostulating angrily with the glowering Ryden.

"What the hell? There are no *private* fields, man, when a plane is in distress. Here! Keep those monkeys away from this plane. Blanding! Newman! Push these people back! You, whatever your name is"—he stabbed a finger at Ryden for attention—"you seem to have authority here. We'll have to make repairs before we can go on. Give us a hand and we can take off before dark, but waste any more time telling me I can't land here and you'll have to put us up overnight. Hell's bells, man! We *are* landed!"

Curt and Dr. Toenjes pushed through the circle. Again Ryden registered relief as he gave up the spotlight.

"Ve don't vish to appear to unvelcoom you," Toenjes said, his voice controlled. "Zey mean to zay ve are not as a commerzial field equipped. You had trouble vith your blane?"

"Yeh, trouble." The lieutenant also had trouble to regain his own equanimity. "Clogged a fuel-line. Headed for Puerto Soledad, but the matter of safety forced me down here."

"I am glad for you to land zafe. Vat can ve do for you?"

The Army man's gaze met that of Curt, who said:

"Name's Curtis. Chief Engineer for the Compañia Agrícola Tropical, who have this valley. This is Dr. Toenjes, of Amsterdam, an agricultural authority in charge of farms. This is Karl Ryden, to whom—er, at whom you were talking. And Gosta Lannestock. Flyers, both."

The Army man grunted again, getting back a little good humor.

"I'm Lieutenant Trainor. This is Sergeant Blanding—and Newman, Foster." The three others were engaged making a space about the plane. "Sorry if we inconvenience you, but we'll have to make some repairs."

"Of course."

Toenjes picked it up. "Karl! Get your men avay vrom ze blane. Giff to Meester Lieutenant Trainor vat help he needs. Gosta! Go to ze cloob und zend out refreshments."

Things organized, ladders brought from the hangars; the two men Newman and Foster stripped to their waists and got busy dismantling the fuel-line of the engine. It was not a simple task but they knew their job. Toenjes took considerable interest, conversing in low tones with Ryden. This left Curt by himself for a moment, and he singled out the sergeant.

"Blanding? Curtis."

They grinned and shook hands. Blanding spat and said: "American? What you doing in this blooming league of nations?"

"Work here. What's the matter? No coöperation from our field force?"

"Coöperation? Say, a guy'd think it was a crime to set down a crippled plane. 'Private field, private field,'" he mimicked. "What the hell? By the way, what you doing with those old crates—those old-time Junkers transports?"

He wore a smile that was half amusement, half disgust, as he nodded toward the two C. A. T. planes. He spat again.

"Junkers?" said Curt. "That what they are? I'm no airman; I didn't know. Only been on the job here ten days or so, myself. Oh, an outfit like this has to keep expenditures down to a minimum. Understand the planes were picked up in Europe secondhand, being cheaper than similar equipment from the States."

"What do you use them for?"

"Freighting, chiefly—that is, we did. Now we use them to lay a chemical mix to treat the soil before planting. They've been pretty useful."

They watched for some minutes the work on the engine. The fuel-line was disconnected, blown out, reconnected. The engine was tested, but still it sputtered.

Lieutenant Trainor, from a kibitzing position above, jumped to the ground. He wore a frown.

"We were scheduled to touch Puerto Soledad this afternoon and proceed at once. If we can catch up with the other planes quickly, they'll wait for us. But supposing we can't make repairs tonight, any way of putting us up?"

"I should think so," answered Curt. "Trouble serious, then?"

"Not serious, but it goes deeper than I thought. I see you have other hangars here." The Lieutenant nodded toward the far end of the field. "Could we put the machine under cover for the night?"

"Sorry," Curt replied. "They were built as hangars, all right, but they're used for storage purposes now. They're full up with materials and supplies. You couldn't even get the nose of your ship inside."

Attention called to the end of the field, they saw movement there. Trainor produced a pair of field-glasses, adjusted them, studied what he saw. Then he shrugged, and Curt automatically reached for the lowered binoculars.

Pointing them at the *bodega*, Curt saw a small crew of men with Lannestock in charge. They'd handworked a flat-car from outside the field fence into position alongside the loading platform. A big door of the hangar was raised, and from the interior the men were bringing lengths of lumber to load onto the car. Curt could see plainly the tall piles of lumber, cross-stacked for seasoning, that filled the open space of the building to the very eaves. Another door was partly open, showing piles of pipe.

However, there was no further thought of an overnight stay, for as Curt handed back the glasses, the plane's motor was gunned to a deafening pitch. This time there was no break in its smoothness. It was then only a matter of minutes before the two mechanics were buttoning up their shirts. Blanding and Trainor shook hands all around. Curt caught the final look Trainor and the sergeant flung at the Junkers planes, then at each other.

The second motor of the Army plane was opened up, both were gunned for a few moments; then the plane took off, circled once above the field, and straightened out to speed off for Soledad.

Chapter Nine

CURT called at Montaya's office in the morning and found the Dark Lily his usual suave and polished self. Curt managed a pleasant "Good morning," and got down to business. "Now, about this survey of the Upper Negro for a reservoir site. Tomorrow I'll make a quick trip above the rapids to refresh my memory of that terrain. It's some years, you know, since I was here. I want to be ready to send out a surveying-party the first of next week."

Getting into details of this job, Curt let himself go. He'd finish the levee and drainage system already worked out on paper and under construction, and enjoy it. But this reservoir idea came from him. It would be his baby, especially as it tied in so closely with the overhead irrigation plan he was so anxious to get into. He lost himself in the discussion of it. But as he finished outlining the scope of his proposed survey, Montaya brought him back to earth.

"Be sure Emilio accompanies you on the trip tomorrow, Mr. Curtis."

Curt blinked. "Of course. Your orders, are they not?"

During some remaining routine items Curt kept wondering why no mention had been made of his trip to the airfield. Montaya had heard of his visit to the hospital, and mentioned it. Curt wondered, too, why there'd been no reference, at least casual, to the Army plane forced down.

But if Montaya had no intention of speaking of the airfield visit, Curt had.

"That reminds me. While at the hospital yesterday I stumbled onto the path to the airfield. So I decided to make them that visit you suggested. You do the men at the field very well in the matter of accommodations."

"You mean the swimming-pool, the tennis-court? It pays."

Hmm, thought Curt. Give him another chance.

"I—uh, know you don't like interdepartmental comments, but I have one you shouldn't object to. That part of the field used daily is kept pretty well under fire control. But one can see from a distance that the grass at the far end of the field is high and dry. It should be kept cut."

"Your are quite right, Mr. Curtis, quite right. I shall make a note of it." And make a note of it he did—at least he did some careful scratching on his calendar pad. . . .

Curt hadn't seen much of his children, and now little Sylvia Mitchell was an added attraction. So today Curt went home early, and made his first acquaintance with the playroom Lee had made for the children. The house stood on five-foot piles. To walk underneath made a grown person stoop, but since the earth was floored over with cement it was a perfect spot for the kids. Lee had fixed them a sand-pile; swings hung from the floor joists above, and their toys were scattered about, here.

He spent an hour playing with the children before the clouds let loose with a ten-minute shower, a feature at this precise time each day. The shower gave Curt a chance to calm the children down with a story so they wouldn't be too excited for supper and bed, and when Lee called for them, he shooed them up the steps and into the house. But he remained outside, and returned to the open basement. For here his eye had caught something of interest during the play which he couldn't have investigated then without raising the children's curiosity.

On the edge of the cement, *inside the hedge*, were dried mud footprints! Some one had stood on this spot. Why? For only one reason. To listen in on what passed above in the veranda living-room.

Then who could it have been? The prints were broad and indicated flat shoes. They weren't large. Not Lee's—for she wore heels. The cook's? No, she didn't know English and eavesdropping would have done her no good. That is, Curt had been told she knew no English.

But Inés, the maid furnished by Montaya, knew English. Not well, but to be understood, which meant that she understood it even better. She was a mestizo, a mixture of Spanish and Indian bloods, and rather an eyeful.

Curt worried. Vargas in the field, a spy here at home to report his every move and word? Dammit, why spy on *him?* Up surged that string of questions again, beginning with Mitchell.

After dinner that evening Curt told Lee of the footprints and his suspicion of Inés. He added: "Lee, I've *got* to know why Mitch was holding up the work. I won't rest easy until I know what his trouble was here. Montaya's the key to it. And who within reach of us is likely to know all about Montaya?"

"Mr. Moore," Lee said quickly.

"Right. And Old Man Moore doesn't give readily. Nevertheless, tomorrow—"

Curt sank back and blew rings to the ceiling. He had plans to perfect. Lee watched, troubled, but said nothing.

On the morrow the weather held hot, and coupled with the ever-present Emilio, it didn't improve Curt's disposition. It was midmorning when Curt and his shadow reached Tempujo for their trip upriver. By phone from San Alejo Curt had ordered the launch fueled and ready. He intended wasting no time here. But the need of a map or two took him first to his office.

As he was about to turn into it, a figure rose from under a palm, and Curt was accosted by one of the most disreputable-looking tramps he'd yet seen in the tropics. An American, clearly, but the many days' growth of beard, the rags he wore, effectively concealed what kind of man this was.

"Mr. Curtis, sir?"

"Yes," Curt answered shortly. He hated subservience in a man, and this one's voice was of the cringing type.

"My name is Collins, sir. I'm looking for work."

Curt eyed the man. The eyes were bloodshot and told unquestionably of hunger.

"Well?"

"I'm a good transitman, sir, and I'm good on gas engines or Diesels. I heard you need men."

Curt stood silent. There were plenty of tropical tramps in these quarters—drunken, irresponsible men, all of them fugitives, if not from the law, then from themselves. Curt had sufficient sympathy to give such derelicts a lift from his own pocket, or a little work if he could—enough to carry them on to some other place. But he knew he could place no reliance in them, and it didn't often pay to take them on. In this case, however, something in the man's bearing didn't quite match the rest of him, and Curt was sufficiently intrigued to pause.

EMILIO unwittingly settled the matter. He was standing by, eyes veiled. By now Curt could read the native's eyes, and the disapproval Curt saw there was enough to swing his decision. Curt nodded toward the door and the man followed him inside, Emilio bringing up the rear.

Lauriano Duro, the draftsman in charge of the office, was bent over his work.

"Anything for my attention?" asked Curt.

"No sir."

The native straightened up, looked at the three, and Curt thought he caught a flicker of Emilio's eyelids before the draftsman bent over his table again.

In silence Curt selected the maps he wanted, together with a bundle of white flags. He took down from a shelf a company's camera, loaded it deliberately, handed the lot to Emilio.

"Put them aboard, and get some lunches packed at the mess-hall. It'll be better than what they could put up for us at the levee camp. See to it there's plenty of coffee—black." Then, as Emilio hesitated, he barked: "Well! That's all! We've no time to waste."

Emilio departed, and Curt spoke to the stranger.

"All right, Collins, where you from?"

"Illinois, sir."

"How long you been down here?"

"Four years, sir."

"Not so much 'sir,' if you don't mind!" Curt was rapidly getting in a mood. The prospect of two days of Emilio was facing him. "What've you done to keep going these four years?"

"Worked most of the time, here and there. I've handled a Diesel shovel, done rough carpentering, used a transit."

"Where'd you come from last?"

"I've been up at the Rosario mines on the hydraulic pumps."

"Why'd you leave?"

"Fired."

"Drunkenness?"

"Yes sir."

"I don't know what I can do for you. I've got to depend on the men under me, and I won't hire booze hounds."

"I'm hungry, Mr. Curtis, and I'm a good worker. I don't get drunk very often. I can keep away from it, honest. I'll promise to leave it alone, if you'll give me a chance. I'll—"

"Don't snivel. Here," Curt sighed, "let's see what you look like on paper. Fill this out. Make it snappy; I've only a few minutes to spare."

The man took the application blank, sat down at a table and commenced writing. Curt loaded his pipe while he studied the man's back.

"Lauriano!"

"Yes sir."

"Here." He handed the native a bill. "Get me a tin of Briggs and a couple cartons of candy bars. Any kind. Put them aboard the launch and hurry back; I haven't much time this morning."

It was Curt's theory that the more candy a man consumed the less alcohol his system craved.

The native hesitated, but under the glower Curt gave him departed in haste. Lauriano Duro hadn't the pertinacity of his compatriot Vargas. The screen door had no sooner slammed after him than Curt approached the man at the table.

"Stand up!"

Collins rose to his feet. Curt looked him steadily in the eye a moment, then reached out and ripped open the shirt. It practically came apart. The man's head jerked up. Curt grunted. "Thought so!" Collins' skin was smooth and healthily tanned—and *clean!* The man was in the pink of condition, other appearances notwithstanding.

"All right, out with it, and quick. What do you want?"

It was a different voice Collins used in answering, as he tucked the shirt together again and under his belt, a voice calm enough if not assured.

"Just what I asked for, a job."

"Quick, man, why'd you come to me?"

"I came to see Mr. Mitchell, but got here too late. Mr. McInnis, across the river, told me to see you."

Curt grunted again. "Collins! Collins! Sure!" The name had suddenly clicked. The man from Henderson's home town—more lately from the Zone! "You wouldn't want to see Bill Henderson too, would you?"

The man's eyes veiled suddenly. Curt flared:

"Well, make up your mind whether to trust me or not. I can't manage a tête-à-tête very often. You're from the Canal Zone. And you drink about as much as I do. Your general appearance needs to be explained." Curt dared a little guesswork. "You came in through Soledad on the destroyer that called there a week ago Monday!"

A rigidity in the other convinced Curt he was right.

"You've built yourself into a tramp by sleeping in old clothes and not shaving for ten days. Your skin isn't used to a beard; you keep scratching your face. But you couldn't resist the comforts of a clean body. You got those bleary eyes from going without sleep, and that hungry look from doing without food. For about two days, huh? Three days? The whole thing's a build-up. Why?"

Collins gave in.

"I needed a good background. McInnis says I can trust you. I think so too, first judgment. It's a long story, and I can't even give it to you. All of it, anyway. I'm asking you, *as a fellow-American,*" he emphasized, "to give me a job. I want to get established here."

Steps mounted hurriedly to the door in the outer room. The door snapped open. Curt picked up the application blank Collins had been working on, and was studying it as Emilio entered, black-browed.

"Everything is ready," the native announced hardily.

Curt looked up. "Okay. We'll have to hold it a few minutes. All right, Collins," he snapped at the ragged man, "it so happens I do need men. I'll give you a try-out, but you better be as good as you say you are. You can go up to camp with me now."

He looked the man over with distaste. "First, go to the next room and take off those rags. Get under the shower, and I'll find you some clean clothes. And hustle it up."

The half-puzzled, half-angry gleam in Emilio's eyes was satisfaction indeed to Curt.

Chapter Ten

SCARCELY a word passed on the chugging trip to the levee camp. Esteban, the Carib launch-boy, sat at his controls and stared straight ahead. Emilio sulked; Collins slept. There was much Curt would have liked to hear from the man, but the presence of Emilio killed all chances of that. For if Emilio had taken his job seriously before, he really settled into it now. During the entire trip he remained within whisper range of the stranger, most of the time staring at him with expressionless, ice-cold eyes.

As for Collins, after a few minutes of that stare he simply turned his back on Emilio and gazed at the river's edge slipping by. Collins was very different from the tramp of an hour ago. In the spare shirt and breeches Curt kept on hand in his Tempujo quarters, Collins showed up a tall, rangy, athletic person, who dispatched most of the lunch Emilio had put aboard—ravenously, thus proving the one point—before settling down to sleep for the remainder of the trip.

Curt had plenty to occupy his mind. His guess, confirmed by the other's silence, that Collins had come to Soledad on the destroyer, was proof enough that something was brewing. But what?

Monahan's shift was coming off duty as the launch made the levee camp landing. Curt took Collins ashore—under Emilio's watchful eye—and while the camp cook was replenishing the lunch-basket he turned the man over to Monahan.

"Put him on a drag this afternoon, Slats. You can tell one way or another about him by the time I get back this evening. Luck, Collins."

Curt left his musette-bag in camp, went briefly into the few questions accumulated since he was here two days ago, then took off upriver again. There were three of them this time—Curt, Emilio, and the Carib launch-boy.

They reached without incident a spot above the C. A. T. holdings, past the point where the Rio Negro levee made an elbow to join the first arm of the Quebrado range. Here Curt had the Indian pull the launch in to the south shore. Then he put on his carefully prepared act. He appeared to deliberate.

"Very well, Emilio," he said at last, "here's our program. I want you to pace off the shore-line and plant these flags every forty steps. Be sure they can be easily seen from across the river. This won't be hard to do, with the river now at a low mark, though you may have to use your machete on small brush. When you reach that bend up ahead, wait for us there.

"Meanwhile, Esteban will set me down at that hill opposite. I'll climb to the highest point, get some pictures for further study, and come down the other side. The launch will pick me up; then we'll cross and get you. Is that clear?"

Emilio fumbled with the flags. "Could not Esteban plant the flags? Then I could stay with you—"

"We need him on the launch. Neither of us could handle it in these rough waters." For some distance they'd been fighting the increased current of the lower rapids.

"But Señor Montaya gave me strict orders—"

"Of course, of course," Curt interrupted impatiently. "He told me, too. That's for where there could be danger of attack such as came to Mr. Mitchell. There can be no danger here. Come, we'll have to get going if we're to get back to camp by dark."

He hustled Emilio, still protesting and blackly reluctant, off along the shore-line, jumped back into the launch, and was set down on the other shore. As the launch-boy headed upstream for the rendezvous, Curt took one look behind him. He could see Emilio was watching him.

Curt was now in somewhat familiar territory. On this bank rose a considerable hill thickly covered with a jungle of trees, lianas, undergrowth. Because of the hill, Finca Uraña, the Associated's farm, didn't touch the river at this spot. Curt plunged into a path used by the women of the farm laborers when they came to the river to wash clothes. He picked up a mule trail at the edge of the banana plantation, broke into a trot.

Banana farms are laid out evenly, the "bits" planted twenty feet or so apart. The plants grow rapidly, shooting up suckers, of which the strongest are allowed to remain, and each single plant eventually becomes a ring of plants, like a bed of gigantic cannas. Their long broad

leaves meet twenty to thirty feet overhead, allowing only scattered rays of sunshine to reach the earth.

A banana plantation is a lovely, peaceful spot—if one has the time to enjoy it. Through these sunbeams brilliant birds and butterflies dart; there are rustlings underfoot of field rats or iguanas or snakes; and all is hushed as a green-windowed cathedral. It was along such a lane, hot, the air still, that Curt trotted. If all went well, he could get to the farmhouse of Uraña and back to the river in thirty to forty minutes. He would have to explain this lapse of time, but he'd worry about that later.

Out of breath and sweating heavily, he reached the farmhouse. There was only a native timekeeper in the farm office, which was the ground floor of the two-story house. Another *mozo* was raking the corral. The young office worker looked up, amazed, at the stranger who appeared out of nowhere, but Curt gave him no chance to put his curiosity into words. He asked in Spanish:

"Where is Señor McInnis today?"

"I think he is at Tigre, señor."

Curt went to the old wall phone and turned the handle sharply. The bell in this box tinkled from the jarring. The thick soft voice of the exchange operator came to him.

"Ring Finca Tigre." He waited. "Señor McInnis there? How long would it take to bring him to the phone? Oh?" He thought a moment. "All right; thanks—won't wait." He hung up. He couldn't risk half an hour.

His eye fell on a typewriter. Seizing a piece of paper, he rolled it into the machine and began to punch out a note:

> Jerry. You've heard of Zora Mitchell and Bill Henderson without a doubt. Convinced of danger here, but don't know what it is. Old Man Moore has confidential file on everyone of consequence in Tierra Libre. Hates to give out but I *must know* all I can about Montaya. Make him spill to you, and meet me at Riverbend about nine Saturday night. Hiring Collins, no chance to talk to him yet. C.

He cast about for an envelope, found one, sealed and addressed his message.

The native timekeeper had been staring at him throughout all this, half in amazement, half in resentment. Curt asked his name.

"Rafael Díaz, señor."

"*Bueno*, Rafael," said Curt. "Tell no one about this. See that Señor McInnis gets this as soon as possible. Phone him to come here. Put it in his hands yourself. Understand?"

He gave the young man a ten-dollar American bill.

"*Sí, sí*, señor," the boy promised.

On his way back to the river Curt caught sight of a brilliant orchid in bloom, an epiphyte fastened to a slender dead tree limb within reach. It was one of the "butterfly" orchids Lee wanted, and had two three-foot candelabra branches covered with dozens of small bright yellow blooms like butterflies alighted.

Here was his excuse for lost time! First wrapping the bulbous roots firmly to the limb with fibrous creepers so they wouldn't jar loose, with his machete he hacked off the limb, fortunately half rotten, trimmed the ends, and carried his prize along.

A family of tiny gray monkeys, hardly larger than kittens, chattered down at this outrage to their privacy. They followed Curt, scolding shrilly, until he emerged into view on the crest of the hill where rocks had prevented thick vegetation. There he saw Emilio was nearly through setting the stakes, but even more concerned in watching for Curt's appearance.

Curt put on the rest of his act with deliberation. He studied the opposite shore, the rising hills behind, put away his field-glasses, took his pictures, then fought his way through the undergrowth down the hill to meet the launch.

"It was some time you were gone from view," said Emilio, when at last picked up. "I worried. You had difficulty, señor?"

"Some," admitted Curt. "But this is what lost me many minutes. My wife wants an orchid collection. She had one when we lived here before."

Curt exhibited the plant with such real pride that it appeared to satisfy Emilio, and the man fell into narrow-eyed sullenness.

"Well, I'm through here," said Curt, tapping the camera. "Let's go."

They picked up the flags Emilio had planted—in his pictures they would mark 100-foot intervals, though this was no more essential to Curt than the pictures. But the ruse had worked.

THEY proceeded to eat lunch in the launch, in the late afternoon shade of a stand of mangroves, trees which sprout roots from branches in midair. These roots eventually take hold in the river bottom or muddy banks, thereby spreading the stand and giving shade over quite an area. From a branch not far from the launch, a noisy bird that Curt knew by the name of "kisadee" called incessantly. At first it was merely annoying, but before the meal was finished it became a definite nuisance.

Curt pulled his pistol, took aim, fired. And his brows shot up in astonishment. There had been no kick when he squeezed the trigger, and the bullet, expelled without force, plopped harmlessly into the water.

Curt tried another shot, but with the same results. He removed the clip and examined the remaining cartridges. They seemed to be all right. The brass shell-case from the first shot had ejected over the side, but the second had fallen into the boat.

Curt picked it up and examined it. Undoubtedly, it was from the same lot as the rest of the clip. Suddenly he noted that Emilio's sullenness had disappeared, that the native was eying the proceedings with a dead-pan countenance.

The bird meanwhile had merely hopped a couple of steps at each shot and was still jabbering its raucous notes. Curt snapped home the clip, tried a third shot. The result was the same as before. So he shrugged, reholstered the automatic, said merely: "Huh. Bad lot of ammunition."

They swung out from shore, finishing lunch as they headed downriver. At length they caught the glow from the floodlights as the second shift was completing its tour of duty, and soon thereafter picked up the pin-point of light that was the lantern marking the levee camp landing.

Before going to bed, Curt talked with Monahan about Collins.

"He'll make a good man," Slats reported. "A little awkward at first, but he knows Diesels and I'd say he had the makings."

Evidently Collins had raised speculations in Monahan too, for Slats' voice was asking questions—who, what, why? But Curt didn't know the answers himself—and Emilio shared the same tent with him now that he had shared with Montaya on his first visit to this camp.

"Give the man your shift," he told Monahan. "We'll have quite a string of machines soon. I'll want you as a roving superintendent mechanic to see they're kept operating at peak."

But the matter of Collins didn't end there. As Curt called at Montaya's office on his return to San Alejo—the following noon, Friday—he found the Dark Lily frowning in a bad humor. The Spaniard came to the point at once.

"You hired a man named Collins, no?" he commenced bluntly. "I had not forbidden this especial, Mr. Curtis, but it must not be repeated. If the occasion arises to hire a person locally, I must first interview that person and decide for myself. Natives, day-laborers, yes, you may use your own discretion both as to individuals and numbers. Salaried workers, no. Is this understood?"

Curt stared, unbelieving, then flared.

"In other words, you don't trust my judgment?"

Montaya's voice became icy. "Such is not the question. If I had not trust in your judgment, I would not have hired

you. This, Mr. Curtis, is an ironclad rule I will not have broken." He paused. "Do you know this man?"

"No. But I had a man I do know try him out. Monahan tells me he's satisfactory. I need such men badly, and my hiring him doesn't tie my hands. He's not under contract."

"*Bueno*. We discuss it no further. Have Mr. Collins in Tempujo early on Sunday morning. I shall be there then and will want to interview the man. After this, please observe my rule."

Curt's anger showed in his face, for Montaya went on at once in a milder tone, as though to forestall an explosion:

"There is another thing. Emilio tells me you were separated on the trip. He told me in order to protect himself. I told you distinctly that Emilio is to accompany you—"

This was too much. Curt broke out hotly: "Señor Montaya, if I'm in danger I want to know it! And what the danger is! Standing a bodyguard over me hampers my movements—"

"Mr. Curtis!" Montaya's voice, already cold, now had a hint of steel in it. "Let us have no histrionics. You are in no danger. Nevertheless, I have lost one chief engineer and I do not propose to lose another. Emilio is a simple precaution. I repeat, you are in no danger personally—so long as Emilio accompanies you!"

Chapter Eleven

CURT found that Lee and the children were at the swimming-pool behind the clubhouse—the cook, about to climb into a hammock slung under the house for her midday siesta, called the information to him. Inés was off duty in the middle of the day—from eleven to three—so the house was empty.

Just as well, Curt thought, for this gave him a chance to inspect his stock of cartridges. The incident of the evening before was still sharp in his mind. He went to the *escaparate* in the bedroom, the tall two-door wardrobe that held his things and Lee's—what she didn't have to keep in the electric-bulbed dry-closet for protection against mildew. From the top shelf he took down the small paper box that held the rest of this lot of cartridges.

He turned it over in his hands, read the label, spilled the contents onto the bed. He examined the shells one by one, but could detect nothing wrong with them. Still, powder in a cartridge, he told himself, if it remains explosive, doesn't lose its efficacy. Either it explodes with its original power, or it doesn't explode.

The bullets he'd shot simply hadn't had standard charges behind them. Now, who could have tampered with them? Who had access to the house? Inés, of course! Her name leaped to mind; the girl had plenty of opportunity.

Thoughtfully Curt went to a wardrobe trunk in a corner of the room, unlocked it, and took from one of the drawers a fresh box of cartridges. This he broke open, to load his clip with shells he knew to be good. He also loaded two spare clips which he slipped into his pocket. Hereafter he'd see to it that no one else had a chance to touch his gun. The faulty shells he replaced on the wardrobe shelf. . . .

The two three-yard shovels on order previous to Curt's taking over the job would arrive on Saturday—tomorrow. So Montaya had said. Curt wanted to be on hand at Cabeza de Negro when the ship docked. This meant he would have to go downriver on the first boat at daylight. He packed his musette-bag with fresh clothing, scribbled a note for Lee, and left.

He spent the afternoon at his office cleaning up detail work, then pulled out for Tempujo. There too he plunged into paper-work for an hour, then at seven had supper at the mess-hall. Emilio, of course, clung like a leech.

"Señor Montaya will be here early on Sunday," Curt told him. "He wants to talk with Collins. Get word to camp by the supply launch in the morning for Collins to come to Tempujo on its return. It'll be the last chance to get him here in time."

The malicious gleam of satisfaction in Emilio's eyes was not lost on Curt. He got to bed early, put in a good night's rest, and, after a snatched breakfast in the false dawn, made an uneventful trip downriver to Cabeza.

Two ships were in port. One was a Japanese that had docked the day before. The other was one of the Company's Norwegian chartered steamers on the New Orleans run. This latter ship carried the two tractor shovels, minus their booms and dippers, as a deck-load.

Ryden was on hand, and in a short humor. Curt tried a pleasantry or two, and when these didn't work fell silent. It was midmorning by the time the tarpaulins had been removed and the first shovel lowered over the side to the dock. Its own brakes released, the big machine was hauled by the dock's baby tractor to the side of the river steamer then loading.

"Am I handling satisfactory so far?"

There was no mistaking the sarcasm. Curt swung around leisurely, looked at Ryden a moment, and his lips framed a natural reply. But, determined not to quarrel with the man, instead of answering insolence with insolence Curt indicated a huge square case then being hoisted by the thick-rope cargo carrier to the deck of the river steamer. The box hovered over the open hatch, then slowly disappeared into the hold. There was a twin to the box on the dock awaiting its turn.

Both cases were of heavy lumber, were marked from Hamburg via Vladivostok, and the labeled inscription said they were generators. Electrical equipment was of prime interest to Curt, for he was responsible for the electric plants at San Alejo and Tempujo, if not for the smaller plant at the airfield.

So, pointing with his pipestem, he asked mildly: "Those generators—are they for me? I didn't know of any on order."

The Swede stared through and through Curt. At length he said thickly: "Ask Señor Montaya, if you must know. I know only my own job."

Curt's temper had been building up for a blow-off ever since his encounter with Montaya yesterday. Still, he'd nursed himself along so far, and nothing was to be gained by words; so with a jerk of his head at Emilio he strode angrily from the dock. Vargas, his features set incuriously, followed, trotting to keep up.

"Clubby chap, what?" said Curt, with a short laugh, when he could trust his own voice. "I need a drink. How about you?"

He was about to turn into the cantina he'd visited the day of landing here, but Emilio held back.

"There's another bar down the street," he said hurriedly. "You may like it better."

But Curt was in a mood.

"Hell, man, what's the difference—this one, that one? Come along!" He pushed Emilio into the room and to the bar.

Fresh from the glaring sun, his eyes didn't take in the scene immediately, but he mounted a stool, ordered a drink, and indicated with a wave of the hand that Emilio should order for himself.

And then over the glass set before him he saw something in the mirror behind the bar that smacked him into alertness. There had been no Tierra Libre customs official on the dock that morning to inspect freight as it was unloaded. And now that very official and his lieutenant were here in the cantina, being entertained at drinks and cards by another man whom Curt felt was familiar yet could not immediately place. These men weren't simply having a drink as he was doing. They were making a day of it—off the job!

Curt pulled a notebook from his pocket, scribbled a few words, ripped out the page, pushed the paper toward Emilio Vargas.

"I need a hundred men at Tempujo by one o'clock," he growled. "Also, the launch will have to make another trip to the levee camp to bring down Monahan. Get this message off for me, will you?"

All the while, however, he was racking his brain over the third man with the customs officers. At last it came to him: The man was one of the mechanics who'd been working at the C. A. T. airfield the day of his visit there. What had he stumbled across?

As they returned to the dock Emilio had the radio message sent off, and by eleven they were on their way back to Tempujo with the one machine this steamer could carry. The other shovel would follow on the second river boat in another couple of hours.

Reaching the river port by one-thirty, he found Collins and the rapidly gathering gang of men. Monahan arrived by two o'clock, and the rest of the day was spent in getting the two machines assembled, serviced, and on their way to where they would pick up their sectors of levee work. If things went as well tomorrow, the two shovels would be at work Monday morning. That was soon enough to satisfy anyone.

But it had been a strenuous, tiring job. After an early supper at the Tempujo mess-hall—with Collins and Monahan occupying a table not far from Curt and Emilio—Curt returned to his bungalow. He switched on the lights, flung his hat to the table by the door. Emilio settled himself on the porch, with magazines and his ever-ready pack of native *cigarillos*. Curt had his trip across the river in mind. This was Saturday, the night he'd arranged to meet McInnis at Riverbend. He had to get rid of Emilio.

"I'm going to bed," he told the man. "Need a good night's rest. You'd better get one too. When you leave, see that the night-latch is on. Good night."

"*Buenas noches, señor.*"

Curt left the bedroom door ajar slightly, for better circulation of air than he could get from the two-foot lattice-work portion of wall under the ceiling. He stripped, showered, and flung himself on the bed under the mosquito bar. Outside, Emilio hadn't moved, simply went on reading, smoke curling up past his squinting left eye.

Curt had no intention of falling asleep; he only wanted to outwait his shadow. But he was so muscle-weary that he did succumb to a cat-nap—with one ear on the alert. The click of the outer door latch brought him to. He glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. Eight-twenty. He'd been dozing for nearly an hour.

Quietly he left the bed and went to the door, but remained out of the wedge of light coming from the porch. The door was wider ajar than he'd left it. He grinned to himself. Emilio, the greasy something-or-other, had looked in on him, made sure he slept, then left. Yes, there was the man now, passing under one of the street-lamps that lined the walks of Tempujo every two hundred feet.

BECAUSE of the fan-shaped layout of Tempujo, Curt's bungalow was in view of the mess-hall, used as a clubhouse outside of meal hours. He could see Emilio enter the long, screen-front building, select a table where he had good view of the lighted porch he'd just left, and settle himself. He was joined at once by a couple of natives—Curt recognized them as rodmen under Al Random—and a pack of cards was produced. Curt grinned again. That should tie up the fellow.

A minute sufficed to pull on shorts, breeches, shirt and socks, but it took longer to lace up his high boots. He slipped a flashlight into a hip pocket, buckled on his gun-belt. He'd like to make sure that no one entered while he was gone and discovered his absence. Emilio had a key; Lauriano Duro had a key. Curt skidded a magazine across the floor, landing it up against the screen door as though it had so fallen. No one could enter without displacing it; nor could anyone enter and leave again, and replace the magazine in just that position.

Quickly he unhooked the rear window screen and swung to the ground. Some hundred yards upriver from the dock were a dozen or more *cayucas*—wooden dugouts belonging to natives in the company's service. Carefully, taking advantage of every black shadow, Curt made his way to them, selected one, worked its line over the stake that held it to avoid trouble in duplicating the knot on his return, crawled in, and dipping his paddle cautiously, he presently had enough confidence to shoot the craft into the stream.

McInnis was waiting for him, slapping viciously at his neck. He seized the nose of the dugout to pull it up onto the bank.

"Gosh, Curt," he complained, "if you'd been any longer, you'd have found only bones. These mosquitoes are big as hawks."

"Yeh," Curt said briefly. "Been noticing. Let's get away from the bank and light up. It'll help some." Presently their pipes doing the work of smudge-pots: "Well, get the dope?"

"Yes. But remember Mitchell, Curt. His curiosity got the better of him just before he was bumped off. Mitch made a secret trip over here one night, just as you're doing now, and for the same reason. The Old Man told me. Now, two are better than one, pal, so I don't spill till you cut me in on it!"

"Jerry," Curt exclaimed, "there's something rotten on the griddle over there! I can smell it, but I can't identify it. Look: You've heard of Zora Mitchell's death, of course, and Bill Henderson's. They were both murders, Jerry, regardless of anything you've heard to the contrary—about suicide or accident, I mean. They were murders to cover up the first one, Mitchell's.

"And Mitch's killing wasn't grudge work. Mitch knew something that had him in a dither, if you can imagine him getting worked up over anything. Monahan gives me that much. But what was it? Well, Mitch is gone, Zora's gone, Bill's gone, and Monahan doesn't know beans. That's why I want the low-down on Montaya. There may be a clue there."

He paused.

"Did you know that Mitch had been sabotaging the engineering work? Slowing it down to such an extent the whole tract would have been washed out come next rainy season? That wasn't like Mitch. Why'd he do that? It ties in somehow."

He supplied briefly facts McInnis didn't know—about the bodyguard who was more like a jailer, the housemaid who spied on his home life, the faulty cartridges. About getting hell from Montaya for hiring Collins.

"Haven't you talked with him?" demanded McInnis.

"Jerry," Curt spat disgustedly, "I can't get near enough the guy to say *boo* before my bodyguard is on my tail."

"But, Curt, you must have worked up some idea!"

"Oh, I had a momentary brainstorm the other day," Curt admitted, "when that Army plane made an emergency landing at San Alejo. You know about that. For an instant I figured Mitch had got the wind up over those two planes we fly. They're Junkers." He gave a sour laugh. "Other things Mitch had let drop indicated that perhaps he had the Panama Canal in mind. But Mitch was no fool! He undoubtedly knew those planes couldn't be used to damage the Canal—if that's what he had in mind.

"Another thing I figured was that maybe Montaya had political ambitions. If he did have plans for a dictatorship unfriendly to the United States—"

McInnis cut in. "Old Man Moore's in a position to know, Curt, and he says positively there are no political strings to your friend."

"So far's known, he means," exclaimed Curt. "But no would-be dictator announces himself in advance."

McInnis grunted. "I've never known the boss to be wrong, Curt."

Curt gave a short laugh. "Well, there are other things wrong with that idea. Let's have the dope, Jerry."

"Yeh. Well, your pal Apolonio comes from an old family down this way. You'll recognize the family name—Lara. Coffee, cattle, hides, silver, cigarettes, *cerveza.*

"His grandmother was Luisa Lara, who married a Montaya. His mother was the only daughter of that union. She married a German settler, name of Kuhlman. The Kuhlmans had a number of kids, but Apolonio looked so much like Grandfather Montaya that he became the old lady's favorite.

"She was the chief moneybags of the old Lara clan, so you can't blame Apolonio for taking the name of Montaya to please her. He could by custom, you know; it was his mother's name. That's why I didn't know where the money came from for this outfit. The fortune was always associated with the name *Lara.*

"Well, he was educated at Harvard, and spent some years in pleasure trips between his own country and the States and Europe, but he went home to stay when the old lady died and left him the bulk of everything. No one knows exactly how many millions it ran to, but the guesses average fourteen to sixteen.

"There are some foggy spots to the story. One thing, he got hooked up somehow in the Cedillo revolt in Mexico, but got out of it with a whole skin. Germany, by the way, is his favorite foreign country. When there he uses his legal name of Kuhlman."

"Germany! Germany!"

McInnis slowed down in his recital. "I suppose that raises the Nazi question in your mind, Curt. It did with me. But Montaya's never been known to have any connections with the Nazis—nor any trouble with them either, if that means anything."

"Germany," Curt said again, thoughtfully. . . . Those two square boxes—generators! They came from Hamburg, via Vladivostok. On a Jap freighter. Those eight oversize coffins that had bothered Mitchell—"pump machinery"—came in on a Jap tramp. From Japan. Or did the stuff come from Germany, via Vladivostok. *And was it pump machinery?* By God, here was something!

And those crated airplane wings. He hadn't seen the stenciling—it must have been on the side away from him. He remembered thinking once how large those crated wings had seemed for the planes in use here.

If he could sneak a look at those wings. . . . Where were they stored? Where would the pump machinery and the generators be stored? In the airfield *bodega,* the old hangars. *Hangars!*

A strangling sound escaped Curt. The two men were seated on a log. Curt bounced up so suddenly as to upset the balance of the log and send McInnis floundering.

"By God, Jerry! What a dope I've been! Staring me in the face! What a dumb cluck, what a dope! One of the slickest Nazi tricks—"

McInnis rubbed his shin. "Well, let me in on it."

"I should've seen it before. I did ask one question. You'll remember it. How could he sink so much money here when the cost of handling fruit will mean so much in competition with you people? Would superior production offset that? I doubt it. Never could see anything there but a subsidy. Well, Tierra Libre doesn't give subsidies. Who would? Answer that question, and you've got it!

"There's one country that'd be damned glad to subsidize him—within limits—this close to the Panama Canal—for favors received. The kind of favors he's in a swell spot to give. That country is Nazi Germany!"

"You'll have to draw me a picture," said McInnis dryly.

Curt ran on: They could bring in the bombers piecemeal—*had brought them in!*—and the bombs. Secretly, behind the backs of customs officials. Mitchell was the only one to get around all over the place, see all the separate transactions, and have enough brains to put them together. Pump machinery, generators—they meant a lot to the chief engineer, who knew his projects did not include the use of that size equipment.

A Nazi crew here, with Toenjes in charge. "Hell, Jerry, he's no more Dutch than I am. Heard him and Montaya talking once. Assumed it was Dutch. Now I know it was German. Ryden and Lannestock, they're not Swedes! By God, Jerry, I'm not mistaken, it's a plant, a carefully worked out plant with perfect camouflage, to knock out the Canal—" Curt sucked in his breath. His voice came in a croak. "Lee! And the kids! Hostages! Jerry, those birds mean business!"

"But they've no idea you suspect all this."

"No! No! And they won't! Listen!"

Chapter Twelve

AS Curt returned to his side of the Negro, he knew now what kind of spot he was in—more important, the terrible position of Lee and the children. But he *knew.* That was the saving point. He knew, and could plan against every contingency. *And* he had two major trumps. One was a friend across the Negro; unlike Mitchell, he was not going to play a lone hand. And so far, Montaya and his precious crew had no reason to suspect Curt's knowledge.

Slipping the *cayuca's* line over its shore-stake exactly as he'd found it, Curt returned to his office-bungalow. He must make certain his absence hadn't been discovered, and he listened under his window, then climbed in.

A glance from the bedroom onto the lighted porch sufficed. The magazine was just as he'd left it. Well beyond, in the mess-hall, Curt could see Emilio still at cards, but now there were four men in the game. The watchdog still faced the lighted bungalow.

Who else was in the mess-hall Curt couldn't see from where he stood. He swung himself to the ground again, took a position from where he could view the whole long room. There were several small groups. Curt accounted for young Dr. Fisher, a few of the transitmen of the engineering force, most of the trainmen—whom he knew by now, engineers, firemen, brakemen. But Monahan wasn't there, nor Collins.

Skirting the pools of yellow glow cast by the Tempujo lights, taking advantage of every shadow, Curt made his way to the bachelor quarters reserved for transients. It was here Collins would have a room for the night. This building was simply a long string of small rooms, with a screened porch extending the length of it. Soundlessly Curt made his way from window to window along the back of the buildings. The first six rooms were not only empty but undisturbed. The seventh room showed a mussed bed. The eighth and ninth rooms were made up and undisturbed, but the tenth and last was occupied—by Slats Monahan, judging from the snore coming from under the mosquito netting.

Huh! That meant that Collins was abroad. But where? Mulling this over, Curt headed back for his bungalow.

He still kept under cover. Near the river wharf, where everything was locked up for the night and only two lights showed—one in the dispatcher's office, one in the dock office—he stiffened into immobility. He'd caught sight of another figure, likewise hiding itself in shadow.

For several minutes neither man moved. Gradually Curt edged himself into deeper blackness, got closer, put the figure between himself and the light from the *comandancia* not far distant. The outline indicated Collins.

He called the name softly. No answer. He tried again.

"Yes?" came the low acknowledgment.

Curt approached. "Looking around, huh? Find anything?"

Silence. Then: "No."

"Well, my friend, it's time for you and me to have a talk. First, your credentials. Let's see them."

No move from the other at first, then an amiable "Sure," and Collins reached into a pocket. He handed over a leath-

er card-holder which had three isinglassed windows. Curt squatted, played his flashlight on the exhibit low against the ground, then snapped off the light. He rose and handed back the case.

"That's better. Lieutenant, Naval Intelligence, eh? Glad to have you. Shake."

It was the handclasp that turned the trick. Collins unbent. "I need a friend here," he confessed.

"You armed?"

"Yes. Had my service pistol cached."

"Good. It's nearly eleven. The village will be asleep by midnight. Go back to your room—unhook your rear window-screen to be sure you make no noise later."

"I did. Got out that way."

Curt grunted. "Well, go back to bed for a while. You've likely sized up the place and know who's here?"

"Sure."

"Then when they're all abed and have had time to get to sleep, wake up Monahan. He's in the last room."

"I know."

"Bring him out along the main track to the motorcar shed, middle of the yards." Curt broke off, stared toward the mess-hall. Some groups were breaking up for the night, judging from the sounds. "Got that? Enough for now. Get back to your room, I'll see you later."

Curt returned to his bungalow; Collins disappeared into the night. Outside the mess-hall Emilio was having a few last words with his erstwhile partners before heading for the engineering bungalow. Curt had barely time to climb in, hook his window-screen behind him, hang his clothes over a chair as they had been earlier, and stretch out under the mosquito bar.

He heard Emilio fumble at the lock, the slight scrape of the magazine as the door pushed it back over the floor. A shadow blocked out the light at his bedroom door. He simulated deep breathing and closed his lids until he could see only through his lashes. Emilio looked and listened, then withdrew. Presently the porch light snapped off, the front door clicked shut, and Curt heard the man's steps head for the bachelor quarters.

The luminous dial of his watch told Curt it was eleven-thirty. Later than he'd thought. He lay relaxed for a few minutes, but dared not close his eyes. Soon he got up, dressed again, and let himself out the front way. He reconnoitered carefully, made his way to the rendezvous and waited impatiently until at last two figures, little darker than the background itself, came toward him. He recognized Monahan's stride.

"Good man, Slats," he said when they were close enough. "This will do you out of your sleep, but it can't be helped! Get yourself a club and keep alert. Collins and I will be gone three or four hours. We mustn't be longer, for the place'll be stirring to life soon after that. Hang out at my bungalow, Slats. Anyone starts snooping around, conk him. Tie him up, only don't let anyone find out I'm missing, and don't be recognized yourself. Got me?"

"Got yuh."

"If we knew any way to protect Collins from being missed, I'd take it. But there are too many under the one roof at his lodging. Anyway, he's only solo here. If he's suspected, he can skip. I've my family—"

"Sure, no questions, Curt. You're on the trail of what killed Mitch. That's enough for me. All I can say is, be careful. Reckon you know what you're doing."

"Thanks, Slats. Let's go, Collins; talk on the way."

The motorcar shed was an open-front building with three short tracks. His own car was headed out, fortunately the first car on its track. Curt remembered the speedometer and disconnected it; there must be no mileage record of this trip. The two men rolled the car forward onto the main track, and pushed it slowly, to make the less noise, down the yard. When several hundred feet beyond the limits of the town, Curt stepped up the pace but didn't yet use the motor.

"Can't risk it," he grunted. "Sound carries over these flats."

Not until a full kilometer from Tempujo did Curt speak again. "Okay. Starter on this car whines pretty loud. Keep pushing, and I'll switch on the engine. It'll catch. Then hop in, and we're off."

Curt didn't open the car wide. The engine was smooth enough, but iron wheels on iron rails in this still night air rang alarmingly loud to men who needed silence.

Under way, Collins turned to Curt in the seat beside him. "I've followed blind so far. Where are we headed?"

Curt chuckled mirthlessly. "The one spot you want above all to visit." After a moment: "We better have it out, Collins. Suppose we begin with you. How did you get in on this? I reckon I know, but I'd rather you told me."

"I had a note from Bill Henderson. He enclosed a letter from Mr. Mitchell—"

"One thing: Did you know of Mitchell's murder before you left the Zone?"

"Yes. That's the reason I was sent. Mitchell hinted in his letter at a Nazi movement here which would endanger the Canal, and he wanted someone sent to confirm some serious discoveries he'd made, and take action.

"But the letter was so involved and guarded and vague that we thought it crank stuff. We get more of that than you'd suppose. Still, we put out some feelers. No matter how wild the yarn that comes in, we can't ditch it in the wastebasket. Naturally we have some pretty good sources of information. First thing was to check up on Mitchell, but, while we were doing that we got word of his murder. So that seemed to indicate a pretty thorough investigation was needed, and I drew the detail.

"While over in Soledad getting the lay of the land, I heard of the other two deaths. That clinched it. The next step was to get in here on the ground, ferret out what was going on."

"Is that what you were doing, snooping around the docks at Tempujo tonight?" Curt chuckled. "What did you think you could learn there?"

"Hell, man," retorted Collins in a huff, "I couldn't just walk in here, look around, and ask questions! I had to get established first, so as to be accepted. You've planted me upriver where there's obviously nothing to see. I've had one definite objective since our plane faked trouble the other day, but it's at San Alejo. Meanwhile, until I can get to it, there's no harm looking around where I can."

"Okay, okay," Curt apologized. "We'll give you a crack at that objective right now. Mitchell wasn't hitting the pipe. I've been smelling trouble myself for the two weeks I've been here, but only tonight did I click on it."

HE told Collins the story Montaya had given him about the hangars—built, then abandoned to storage purposes because the flyers pointed out the bad location. He told of the boxed airplane wings he'd seen the day of his arrival. For spares, he'd been told! And sure enough, the one time he'd visited the airfield, the same day the Army plane made its landing, they really had replaced a bad wing on one of the machines. He told of Mitchell's rising suspicions over a shipment from Japan—or *through* Japan, he added—of eight long square-end boxes. Heavy boxes, like overstuffed coffins, Monahan had told him. Stenciled *Pump Machinery.*

He told of only yesterday having seen another pair of heavy square boxes marked *Generators,* from Germany via Vladivostok. So far as he knew, and he was pretty familiar with the project by now, they had no use for generators of that size; nor were any on order that he knew of, and he'd had access—presumably—to all engineering equipment orders then placed.

They reached the airfield spur. Here a wide stand of manzanitas made a black blob on the landscape. They dared not continue use of the motor, for sound rises, and

San Alejo was not more than a kilometer ahead and above them. Pushing the car up the branch line, and backing out by the third leg of the Y onto the main line again, they had the car headed for Tempujo once more. They left it in the blackness of the low trees.

Curt fumbled in the tool-box, stuck a chisel into a hip pocket, and the two men struck off down the airfield branch. Stars there were aplenty, and they gave some light, but there was no moon and the going was rough. They followed the tracks to the spur that led to the *bodega* at the lower end of the field, then up this spur to the fence. This lower gate was locked, but Curt expected that. He led the way along the fence until they'd turned the corner at the end of the field, then on the copse of trees that sheltered the big buildings.

"I doubt if we need to worry about a guard inside," Curt muttered. "The fence is ordinary protection, and they couldn't keep a watchman at this end of the field without his showing a light at times. Lights down here would cause speculation if seen from San Alejo."

He seized hold of the fence and pulled and pushed experimentally.

"I don't know," he confessed, "but I suspect it's strung along the top for alarm. In any case, it'd be near impossible for us to get over that barbed stuff in the dark. We'll burrow under."

They used the flashlight, playing it close to the ground. Putting the chisel to work to loosen the earth, Curt scraped away with his hands until they had a hole through which they could crawl. He had a sudden thought.

"Hey, take off your clothes! I've got fresh ones at Tempujo for myself, but if I give you any others, it might be noticed."

"Right."

Collins stripped to his shorts for the forage, and had to carry his automatic in his hand, as he had no belt for it. They circled the three buildings cautiously, the two hangars, the adjoining shed-roof between, duplicate of the hangars at the other end of the field.

"Haven't yet cut the grass here," commented Curt. "Huh. Probably don't intend to—it's a better indication that the buildings aren't in active use."

High in the walls was a continuous horizontal strip of windowing in ground glass. Not the faintest glimmer of light showed anywhere.

"Absolutely perfect camouflage from above," growled Curt. "Look how they built the center portion around trees. The trunks go up through the roof. I'll bet not a square foot of these buildings can be seen from the air. Only the tracks leading in here would tell anything, and they can't be avoided. But even the tracks, with the weeds not kept down, probably look like a cart-path."

They were now in front. Down at the other end of the field only a few night-lights showed.

"Well, we can't force the doors, obviously."

"Can we dig under as we did with the fence, or do you suppose there's a floor?"

Curt pondered. "Bound to be a cement floor," he decided. "Anyway, we couldn't tamp down earth inside when we left. But the wall is only corrugated sheet-iron. Let's find a section to pry loose."

They searched along the back of the buildings, coming finally to a spot where Curt could use his chisel again with least likelihood of its being discovered. It took minutes before they had one sheet of the sheathing sufficiently sprung to give them entrance. There was noise to this job, try as they would to muffle it, but they seemed to have the field to themselves. They crawled through the opening.

Only Curt had a flashlight. He played it about experimentally, then more boldly, taking care that neither the beam nor a reflection from it should hit the strip of windowing. Then it fell on something and stopped dead! Directly above them, spread wings of death.

"By God, Collins! What'd I tell you!"

His words sounded hollow, and echoes slapped back at them from the walls. The finger of light picked out the fuselage of a huge plane that towered above the two men, played along it back and forth. A long, slender, cigar-shaped body, its nose of transparent plastic, two-motored, its wings appearing stubby from this angle.

"A Heinkel!" exclaimed Collins, and again echoes reverberated.

A Heinkel it was. But on the under side of its wings and on the side of the fuselage was lettering and the circle-within-a-star-within-a-circle emblem to identify it as an American plane!

THEY couldn't stand there staring all night. Curt swung the beam of light about, and they went over the big building—one building, they found, now they were inside, for there were no partitions, only the trunks of trees rising through the lower shed roof. This central section was the machine-shop, and well fitted out. Along the entire front of these three joined buildings were thin stacks of lumber, stacked pipe and boxes, so piled as to present the picture Curt had got through field-glasses a few days ago. With doors open, there would be the picture of a solidly packed warehouse. Actually, all materials could be pulled down quickly. "Clever!" Collins grunted.

The big plane they first came upon appeared to be ready for flight. In the other hangar was a second plane not yet fully assembled. The motors and propellers were missing, but the two square boxes Curt had seen pass through Cabeza only that morning, the boxes stenciled *Generators,* had been knocked apart, and the two motors for this plane stood revealed on the floor ready to be hoisted into position.

"What'd I tell you!" growled Curt. "As soon as I got the low-down on Montaya tonight, all the pieces began to slide in together and I knew this was the answer. But man alive, in spite of my eyes, it's hard to believe! Such a long shot ranks with suicide!"

"And the thousands of parachute troops used in Crete?" asked Collins dryly. "The spearhead of any mechanized thrust? The submarine that entered Scapa Flow—and got away again?"

"I know," returned Curt. "A surprise attack—"

"There you have it!" Collins' voice was bitter. "A surprise attack! The Canal has the best defense possible, and it's being constantly improved and extended. But protection for the Canal depends on sufficient warning to get planes into the air, to get anti-aircraft ground units into action."

"And these planes, coming over land, from unsuspected, close-in neutral territory—"

"Hell, man, they'd be over the Canal before effective resistance could be organized. Why, some of our advance air-bases and listening-posts are farther out from the Canal than this! These planes could attack by moonlight, or if in the daytime that paint job on the wings would give them considerable time before the defense could be sure they weren't a new type of American plane."

"But their chances of tying up the Canal?"

"Damned good, I'd say. Both planes could dive on the same set of locks, one taking the northbound channel, one the southbound. Chances are, though, they'd bomb Gatun Dam. That'd be an easier job and turn the trick by drying up the Canal's source of water!"

There followed a silence which Curt finally broke to say sourly: "Well, we haven't got all night. There's something else to locate—those boxes like oversize coffins."

Collins pointed briefly in the beam of light, and Curt swung it from one end to the other of a bulkhead which rose to the height of the window-stripping along the back of the central section, the machine-shop. In front of this wall was a heavy work-bench on which lay in orderly precision small parts, tools, instrument panels evidently intended for the plane not yet assembled. At one end was a door, padlocked.

Curt cast about for something to climb on, found a stool, which he placed on the bench. Standing on this he peered over the top of the boarding.

"Roofed," he said. He pulled the chisel from his pocket and pried about to find a plank looser than the others.

When he found a board he could force up and had cast his beam of light inside the bulkhead, his body stiffened. At last he climbed down silently, handed over his flashlight to Collins, motioned the other up.

Stacked inside the long storage room, securely braced on heavy timbers, was a single row of eight streamlined aërial bombs, each the height of a man. On a shelf above them was a neat row of eight nose-fuses and eight tail-fuses ready to be screwed into place.

"Thousand-pounders!" breathed Collins, back on the floor. "Of course, they'd be bound to use the most powerful. They'd have to put all their hopes in one dash. They'd never get close enough a second time."

"All right, we've found out what we wanted to know," growled Curt. "Let's get out of here. It'll take time to get back to Tempujo."

He replaced the stool exactly as he'd found it. Under the trees again, they forced back the panel of corrugated sheathing, bent nails sufficiently to hold it down. While Collins climbed into his clothes again beyond the fence, swearing mildly over some ticks he'd picked up, Curt filled in the hole, covered the ground with brush and rubbish.

En route they worked out the angles.

Curt said: "You're on assignment, Collins. What are your orders? I mean, now you've got what you came for, what do your books of regulations tell you to do?"

Collins gave a short, "Ha!" Then, weighing his words carefully: "Of course, there's a certain amount of red tape necessary in any line of work. Reports and so forth. On the other hand, an operative is frequently obliged to use his own discretion—"

This was enough. "Okay. Thought you'd come through. Now then, no secret is ever safe for long. Something's bound to give it away sooner or later, if only the flicker of an eye. And we're in the hands of a mighty suspicious crew. They've got a lot at stake.

"So we'll have to work fast. Here's my idea: If you have a better one, spill it. First, I have to think of my family. They're hostages, pure and simple. Well, tonight when I saw McInnis, I laid the groundwork for getting them to Soledad. Since I'm certain these people don't yet actually suspect I know anything, it ought to work. Once they're safe, a report to authorities would no doubt turn the trick, but it would embarrass the Tierra Libre government, and today every effort's turned toward good relations.

"Besides, I want to see the murderers brought to justice. Regardless of who actually did the jobs, we know who's responsible, who's behind them; but it could never be proved in a court of law. They'd go scot free. So there's only one thing to do. How much do you know about those bombs?"

Collins hesitated, but only for a moment.

"I've had some training in American types," he admitted. "I expect the principle of these is pretty much the same. Anyway, there's no help for it. We can't send for an expert. I'll have to chance it."

"Good! Now for some details."

They talked, planned, argued this point and that, the full trip. It was after four when they reached Tempujo, pushing the car into the yards from a long distance outside, and Curt hooked up the speedometer again.

There was movement at the woodpile in back of the mess-hall. Smoke rose from the stovepipe of the lean-to kitchen, and the smell of roasting coffee came pungently to them.

They approached Curt's bungalow cautiously, found Monahan on the job.

"Nary a soul been around," the man said.

"Good. Slats, we've got a job on our hands. Bad job. Want in?"

"Hey! Why'd you suppose I squatted here all night without an argument?"

Curt chuckled. In the lee of the hibiscus hedge he told Monahan who Collins was, why he was here, what the two of them had just found. The lanky shovel-man didn't ask a question throughout the recital, and the only surprise he expressed was one "I'll be damned!" He could listen, this fellow.

"Everything hinges on my getting Lee and the kids over to Soledad today. I've got that planned. If it works, we'll have Jerry with us. The four of us will get across the flats as we two did tonight—about midnight.

"Jerry, Collins and I will have our work cut out for us, but a good deal depends on you, Slats. Your job will be to make your way up through San Alejo to the radio station above, get the drop one way or another on whoever's stationed there, and smash the sending apparatus beyond easy repair. This will cover our escape but leaves you holding the bag," Curt worried. "Only way of your getting out is over the Quebrados and across the Negro into Associated territory."

"Don't worry about me. I can make it."

"Good. This leaves one thing: We want to see the murderers of Mitch and Zora and Bill get what's coming to them."

"Yeh." Monahan spat.

"Well, we haven't figured out a synchronization to take care of all the ringleaders. All we can plan on are Ryden and Lannestock. If we can get them to the lower end of the field, we'll be halfway satisfied. Now, the hangar entrances are bound to be wired for alarm, but we can't be certain there's no break in the circuit since whenever they last tested it.

"So we plan to fire the grass. Those two babies will be so concerned for the safety of the hangars it should bring them on the double. But it'll be midnight; they'll be abed, and we can't even be certain they'll have a guard to raise an alarm. At one o'clock straight up, you telephone the field—"

"Yeh, got your point. Can do."

"And we need some explosives. Dynamite, powder."

"Easy. I can get that."

"Well, then, that's the best we've worked out so far. See if you can think up anything. Meanwhile—good luck!"

Chapter Thirteen

MONTAYA had said he'd be at Tempujo early on Sunday. Early for him must have meant ten o'clock. He was headed for Cabeza. Curt wondered why, then remembered that the Japanese freighter in port yesterday was pulling out today. With German shipping chased from the seas, with the British blockade pretty effective in the Atlantic, contact with Berlin had to make a detour. A long one.

Montaya had his neat black brief-case with him and never let it leave his hands. Reports, decided Curt, and probably pictures of the assembled plane. Even gangsters want some kind of proof for the money they pay out.

The Señor talked on the river docks with Collins, who presented the picture of the tramp he was supposed to be. He was bleary-eyed, droop-mouthed, and with a hangdog, defeated air, despite snapping back his shoulders for effect.

Montaya looked him over coldly, asked him a good many questions, especially about the Rosario mines, from which the man was supposed to have come recently. Curt was apprehensive at this, but Collins had schooled himself well before crossing the river. He knew the answers.

In the end Montaya was satisfied and Curt nodded dismissal, saying shortly: "I'll be sending the launch up river at daybreak. Be on it. And keep away from the bar. One drink, and you're out on your ear!"

Collins slunk away.

Montaya was using the launch for his trip to Cabeza today. Curt descended to the floating stage to see him off. And here the first step in his plans nearly misfired. Setting out from Riverbend was a small skiff. Though Montaya was patently anxious to be on his way, Curt had to keep him talking long enough for that skiff to reach the Tempujo shore.

True, there was plenty to say, but it wasn't essential at the moment, with Montaya in a hurry, and it began to sound a trifle hollow when at last the little boat from Riverbend bumped the stage, and out climbed a native with a letter for Curt.

Montaya's eyes narrowed. No longer was he in such impatience to get started. Curt ripped open the envelope, read the note. A grin split his face from ear to ear.

"From friends in Soledad," he explained. "McInnis, their chief engineer, invites me and my family over for an anniversary dinner tonight. Of course, I'd like to go, but I can't. I can't even spend the day at San Alejo. But I can send the car for my wife and the children—"

"Mr. Curtis!" Montaya's voice was frigid. "You've contracted to remain on the concession for the term of your contract."

Curt blinked, stared. "Hunh?" he said.

"Your contract, Mr. Curtis, binds you and your family to remain here."

"What do you mean? My contract binds my family to residence here with me, yes; but a visit to Soledad isn't breaking residence. And anyway, I won't have my wife cooped up, unable to see her friends who are so near. I don't care so much for myself; I have enough to keep me busy without a social life. With my wife it's different."

He drew a deep breath and rushed on.

"What the hell are you afraid of? That I'll spill your secret formula? I don't even know it! That I'll lose time from the job? I sha'n't be going. But get this, Señor Montaya, and like it or not, I'm either sending my family to Soledad today to visit our friends there, or I walk off this job right now, contract or no contract. And let's see you stop me!"

The knuckles of Curt's fist, clenching his pipe, were white as he jabbed home his words. The act worked. Montaya bit his lip, glanced at his wrist-watch.

"Bueno, bueno," he finally said, more smoothly. "There is no need of this heat. It will be only for a day or two. But understand, this visit must not be used as an opening wedge for regular contact with the Associated people. That I will not have during our construction period."

His dignity recovered, he turned to Emilio, who had been standing by, staring incuriously into the distance.

"Help to get Señora Curtis and the children across to Riverbend."

"Sí, señor."

Curt mounted the steps. At the dispatcher's office, he put in a call for his house at San Alejo.

"Hiya, Lee. Surprise! Pack yourself and the kids. You're visiting Jerry and Marta for a day or two. They're having an anniversary dinner tonight—"

"But Jeff, what anni—"

"I'm sorry I can't go. As I told you, I'm completely tied up until the new shovels are in operation. Anyway, you have a good time for the both of us. I'm sending the car for you now. Can you be ready in forty minutes?"

"I think so, dear, but—"

"No but's. I can't go, and that's that. If you wait for me, you may never see them. There's no telling when I can get a day from the job."

He hung up. This last should tell Lee the urgency of the situation without giving the operator—who was probably listening in—anything to chew on. He only hoped Lee wouldn't get to worrying and let it show in her face before Inés. No telling how close the espionage system here worked, how much authority Dr. Toenjes would have without Montaya at hand, how fast the man would work. Curt hadn't missed the fact that Emilio had quietly put in a call for Dr. Toenjes himself.

But Lee reached Tempujo by noon. The kids bounced about in excitement, clutching at Curt. He turned them over to Emilio, together with the three small bags Lee had brought. Then he held Lee close, whispering while pretending to kiss her: "Don't look so anxious, sweet. Keep a clear face. Everything's under control, and I'll be with you sooner than you think."

He managed to slip into her palm a note folded tightly. "For Jerry," he whispered; and this time kissed her.

The skiff had been held on this side to take Lee across. Emilio loaded it with bags and children. Curt then handed Lee into the boat and watched the crossing. He saw her met on the other bank—that would be Jerry, God bless him!—and they waved across at each other.

So far, so good. The first step was accomplished. Curt and Emilio grabbed a quick lunch, and the two took sturdy mules for a trip along the river-bank in the wake of the machines that had set out yesterday. Until dark Curt forced from mind all thoughts but of the job in hand. Monahan had been all day at the tractor-shovels. Their progress had slowed up, the terrain being more difficult. More filling, more matting had been necessary. He returned to Tempujo along with Curt and Emilio, and after the three had showered and changed clothing, they had supper together. Collins was finishing his at a table by himself. He looked fresher than he had this morning.

AFTER supper Curt went to his office, followed as usual by his bodyguard. "Fine," he thought; "this is once when I really want the greasy snake around."

Emilio lodged himself on the porch by the table lamp, feet outstretched onto another chair, a pile of magazines and a fresh pack of the sweet-smelling native cigarettes at his elbow. Curt settled down at his desk in the drafting-room, grinning wryly to himself over the thought that here was something he wasn't getting paid for. He hadn't yet drawn a salary check here; nor would he ever, come what might of this night's work.

Eight, nine, ten o'clock came, and still Curt applied himself. There was plenty to be done, and he might as well do it. Emilio looked in on him once, annoyed, but making no comment. Curt merely looked up, then back at his desk again.

Ten-thirty. Curt rolled up what prints he'd been using, stacked his papers. He came to the door of the drafting-room, stretching and yawning. In the middle of the stretch he stiffened. Emilio looked up, instantly alert—almost suspicious. Curt's eyes, without his having turned his head, seemed to be piercing the darkness beyond the porch.

He said in a low voice, keeping his lips stiff: "There's somebody out there, out behind those palms. Size and shape looks like—Collins, I'd say. Put out your light."

As he spoke, he reached behind him inside the door of the drafting-room and switched off those lights. Emilio's reaction was to snap off the table lamp and move catlike to the door, reaching for his gun.

Then Curt struck. The barrel of his own gun caught the native behind the ear, and Emilio went down without a sound.

Curt hauled the unconscious man into the bedroom and shut the door. He closed the hinged bamboo shutters over his window, then turned on the light in the adjoining shower-room and left that door open a crack. There was no rope available, and so he ripped a sheet into strips to bind the man's hands behind him—his feet, his legs. He fashioned a gag, pried open the teeth, secured it in place. Then he picked up the inert form and tossed it on the bed.

As an added precaution, he spilled the cartridges from Emilio's gun and went through the man's belt and clothing for more, and as a final touch tucked the mosquito net-

ting in under the mattress. Should Lauriano Duro by some long chance look in, he'd suppose it was Curt himself, asleep. No one else had a key to the building.

Before snapping off the bathroom light a glance at his wrist showed it was ten-forty. On Sunday nights Tempujo settled down earlier than on Saturdays. Already most of the residence lights were out, and only one end of the mess-hall showed activity. His eyes now adjusted to the dark, Curt could see through the screen door what looked like two trunks to the palm tree in the yard.

"Collins?" he called softly.

"Right."

Curt picked up a camera and flash-bulb he'd set apart earlier, then let himself out and down the short path. For several minutes neither spoke; then as Curt was grumbling, "Wish they'd hurry, I'd like a smoke," Collins touched his arm and pointed in the dimness. Two figures were making their way toward the bungalow, taking advantage of every patch of heavy darkness. The four men joined forces.

"Lee and the kids?" were Curt's first words.

"Okay," McInnis answered. "By luck, the *San Timoteo's* taking on fruit. They're aboard now. The Old Man's given orders to speed the loading and be ready to pull out at daylight with whatever load they have by then. He'll get hell from Distribution," McInnis chuckled, "but I guess his shoulders are broad enough."

"The old coot!" said Curt. "Never thought I could love him so much. Let's get going. We can talk on the way."

Monahan stopped them at a cache he'd prepared earlier in the evening, and all four shared the load—the sticks of dynamite, three cans of black powder, the coil of fuse.

Getting to the motorshed and running a car outside the yard limits unseen proved easy. Once under way, Curt related to McInnis what they'd found last night, what they were headed for. At one point Collins interrupted:

"We'll get there about midnight. Monahan's job is set for one. Not sure that'll be time enough for me. Got to study those fuse mechanisms. Chances are they'll be simple enough, but I can't be sure."

"Okay, another half-hour, think?"

Collins considered. "We'll have to chance it," he said reluctantly; "we can't take all night. Anyway, these explosives will do the job on the planes in case I can't set the bombs for explosion. Make it one-thirty. Once you men get the dynamite planted, you'll have to clear out. I'll finish priming the bombs alone. Then if anything goes wrong, we won't all grow haloes. You'd be no use to me, anyway."

"Guess you're right," Curt growled. "Well, we can't all be heroes." Mentally he saluted the Navy man.

Midway across the flats he stopped the car to climb a pole and cut the two telephone lines—the dispatcher's line and the general office link between San Alejo and Tempujo.

Nothing happened to impede them. They reached the foot of the Quebrados in good time, despite running without lights. There Monahan melted into the night to grope his way up a trail to the faintly seen radio towers above.

A wide ditch circled the foot of the Quebrados, designed to carry off the torrential rains of the wet season as they flooded down the mountain-sides. A wooden bridge carried the tracks across this channel. The three men quickly pushed the car through the airfield spur and main-line connecting tracks so it was headed for the river again, and pushed it back across this bridge so it was clear for the run to Tempujo.

As Curt and McInnis were loading themselves gingerly with explosives—the dynamite and two cans of powder—Collins spoke up.

"It won't take all three of us to break in. I'll be planting this last can to knock out that bridge behind us. Have that much done."

"Good."

Curt cut a length of fuse for the job, took the rest of the coil, and with McInnis got under way for the hidden hangars. They reached the fence, and Curt led the way cautiously to the spot where he'd broken through last night. He played his flash along the ground. Good. The leaves and débris were undisturbed. Tonight it wasn't necessary to use such care. They had the proper tools, and so they simply cut through the fence and bent back a section to make a man-size hole. At each snip of the cutters the taut wire made a loud *ping* which seemed all the louder in the stillness of the night.

"That sound carries!" McInnis warned.

"Not to the other end of the field."

"Yeh, but I don't like this, Curt. Looks too easy. I can't believe they don't keep some kind of watch. You would, I would; they're not dumber, are they? You could have got through last night by sheer luck."

"I know. It's been in my mind too. But there's nothing we can do about it except keep alert."

McInnis' words were prophecy. It was as they were hauling at the strip of corrugated sheathing—a noisy job itself!—that they heard the running feet. So there *was* a patrol maintained! The two men jumped away from the wall and fell flat in the dry grass. The feet pounded around the end of the building; a flash played back and forth and picked out the hole in the fence, the sprung sheet of sheathing.

"Was ist das? Antworten Sie!"

The man ran to the fence, then to the break in the hangar wall. The sheet had not been ripped sufficiently to admit a person, so the man turned from the building and played his light about the space between it and the fence.

"Kommen Sie hier! Hören Sie?" He tried Spanish: *"Qué pasa? Venga!"*

The two Americans couldn't possibly avoid detection long. Curt made a cautious move for his gun, and the rustle of the dry grass gave him away. The guard fired wildly in that direction and doused his flash.

Curt and McInnis rolled apart instantly, but neither used his gun in this blackness, for the flash would betray his position. The guard, too, after the first wild shot, held his fire. But his movements showed he was edging toward the fence.

"Alarm wire!" shouted Curt. "Along the fence top! He's trying to reach it!"

"Ah! Amerikaner!"

The guard lunged for the fence, but there came a shot from beyond it, from the other side. Collins! A quick stab from Collins' flashlight showed the German close to the fence, his arm upstretched, the man ready to spring. Another shot, and the man went down.

"Finished my job at the tracks," Collins called anxiously, "and heard this guy as I got near the fence. Then the shot. You okay?"

"Yes," cried Curt. "There's a hole in the fence, Collins. Get busy, you guys. I'll see if the shots carried."

HE ran around the end of the building, to the front. He had a clear view to the other end of the field. A few night lights showed, as they had last night. Under one of these, the one outside the clubroom, two figures stood like statues—men listening. Presently they seemed to relax, and moved out of the light, not fast as though alarmed, and the clubroom lights snapped on. Curt relaxed too. The shots had been behind the buildings here, and the sounds wouldn't have carried sharply to the other end—he hoped. He returned to the others.

Collins and McInnis had forced entrance to the hangar. All three had flashlights tonight, and Curt found McInnis taking a quick look-see for himself. Collins was at the bomb-room door, forcing the lock.

Inside the long partition they spent a moment studying the layout. The cylindrical casings were pointed at the bulkhead, which was constructed of thick planks. When assembled, there'd be a space of about two feet between the noses of the bombs and this heavy wall.

"Okay, men, it'll work," Collins said. "Get busy on your jobs; I'll handle mine."

This room was wired with lights. Since no beam could escape outside, Collins snapped the switch and immediately got to work on a study of the first tail-fuse at hand.

"Huh," he said dismally, "they're the arming vane type. Well, guess I can revolve them by hand. Nose-piece—I understand that well enough. Pull the pin, and they're set for impact."

Collins' job was to assemble these bombs and release all mechanical restraints so that impact on the noses would explode them. He started to wind the vanes.

Meanwhile, Curt and McInnis put saws to use. They cut half through all the ground supports which held the heavy wall firm, then sheared through the ceiling ties. So much wasn't necessary, perhaps, but it helped. Thus, an explosion of dynamite outside this wall would force it back against the noses of the bombs.

They then planted the dynamite, dragged the two motors to the spot, measured the fuse. Against the chance that Collins might not properly set the bombs—for they were, after all, foreign to him—a can of black powder was planted in the cockpit of each machine. At length the three charges were set, with fuses that would allow Collins time to get away.

"Dammit," grumbled Curt, "Collins wants pictures! But we can't risk lighting up the window-strip by the flash so early. He'll have to take them when he's ready to light the fuses."

They looked in on Collins. In the dead air of the tight-closed room, his face shone with sweat.

"Okay," he told them, "I'm about set. Only three noses left to screw in, then all pins to remove."

"It's late," worried Curt. "Close to one-thirty! Took us longer than we'd expected. Slats will be phoning them any minute now."

"Yeh. You two get going."

"Might's well." But Curt was reluctant. Then: "You've no watch, Collins—take mine. It's synchronized with Monahan's."

He handed it over and still hesitated. Collins lifted his head sharply to speak again, but Curt held up his hand.

"Okay, okay," he said, "we're on our way." He set the camera on one of the cylinders, carefully, to balance it. "We'll fire the grass now. There was a shower this evening and it'll take a little time to get it blazing good."

Curt and McInnis snatched up bunches of tinder-dry grass from sheltered spots as they ran to the front of the hangars. Curt was getting anxious. Merely to fire the grass and phone an alarm was a negative method of bringing Ryden and Lannestock to the hangars in time to go up with their ships. So many things could upset this plan. There was no doubt in Curt's mind that once the two "Swedes" saw the hangars endangered by flames, they would dash to reach them. But suppose Monahan failed to take the radio station by surprise? Then he wouldn't get to the phone by the zero hour. Suppose the night operator was asleep and didn't answer promptly. The bombs wouldn't wait.

His worry was short-lived: Curt and McInnis were brought up short as they rounded the end of the hangars. The tennis-court at the other end of the field was now ablaze with lights!

Even as they stared, a small band of men was emerging from behind the office building headed this way. Had Monahan's call come too soon? No, for these men were only trotting. Apparently the Germans had decided at last to investigate those shots. Perhaps the patrolman had been due back by now, and his failure to return forced the decision. But whatever brought it on, here they came. And they'd reach this end of the field before Collins' job was completed.

"Six of them, Jerry! The two of us can't count on holding off that gang with pistol fire! Not and get away in time ourselves!"

"Blaze the grass, Curt! All the way to the fence and around the other side of the hangar to the rear fence!"

"Sure, sure! A lot of fire ought to slow them up—long enough!"

Curt lit his first bunch of tinder, planted it, raced on some feet with another. McInnis did likewise, heading around the other end of the long building. They met at the back. By now there was a swiftly creeping line of fire behind them, blocking off the hangars within this entire corner of the field.

There was nothing they could do for Collins but shout into the building a warning of the men on the way. Collins was now grabbing off his pictures—the planes from different angles. He'd taken the row of bombs already.

CURT and McInnis raced across the black fields, stumbling constantly, but making ground. Shouts rose behind them. Men fighting the fire, fighting to get through it to extinguishers, no doubt, in the building beyond. Then came the furious chugging of a motorcar headed from the upper end of the field.

"They expect to get behind us, Jerry, head us off! We'll have to stop that before they reach our car!"

They were close to the airfield branch. They turned, raced up it toward the car which hadn't yet rounded the curve of mountainside. There were half-rotted logs left from clearing the field. Curt and McInnis had perhaps a minute and a half—a minute. They tugged and hauled at one of the logs, pried it loose and slung it across the tracks. The driver would see it, but not in time to stop.

Then came the car. Around the curve of mountainside it sped. It hit the log, bounced from the rails, turned over. But not before a figure had snapped open the door and shot from it. This figure rolled over and over and scrambled to its feet.

"Toenjes!" shouted Curt joyfully. "By God, Jerry, this is luck! I supposed he had a house up in San Alejo. I didn't know he lived at the field."

Toenjes it was—a wild man in the flare of the car's headlights which still worked, curiously enough, one of them slanting skyward. He had a gun in his hand but was helpless from both the glare of lights and the loss of his glasses.

There were two others in the car. One was apparently pinned down, the other hurt and feebly trying to climb through a window. Neither was one of the "Swedes." Curt after one look ignored these and was about to put a bullet into Toenjes' leg or thigh to prevent further action should he find his gun and give chase, when a thought flashed.

"Jerry! They planned on Lee and the kids as hostages if I got wise! That business works two ways. We'll take Toenjes with us. Then if things don't go well at Tempujo—"

"Okay. Grab him."

Between them Curt and McInnis seized the raging man and hustled him along the tracks toward their car. Toenjes' legs didn't pump fast enough to suit them, and they dragged him most of the way.

They kept glancing up toward the radio station high above. No lights showed on the black mountainside. They reached the car, bound Toenjes' hands behind him, gagged him to get rid of his spluttering threats, and tossed him in the back. Another glance upward, and a light popped on and off several times under and between the two shafts. A rectangle it showed, a window.

"Man, is that a relief!" exclaimed McInnis. "They'll send no messages tonight!"

"Yeh, didn't know myself what Slats would be up against," Curt admitted. He discovered his mouth was dry. He laughed. "Jerry, all our carefully synchronized plans went screwy. Slats must have just got control up there. Probably hasn't phoned after all. Won't need to now. He can sure see action on the field against that!"

They looked back. The black bulk of the hangars showed up within a solid thick wall of fire. The waist-high

grass blazed fiercely, throwing flames high into the air. They were licking at the trees overhead; they'd spread beyond the fence.

Against that sheet of light they saw Collins come stumbling their way. He reached them out of breath, tossed the camera into the car, gasped out that hell was ready to pop, and collapsed on the back seat. There he discovered Toenjes.

"Traveling companion we picked up to keep you company," said Curt. "Dr. Toenjes himself, if you please. He'll be glad to see we get through to Soledad, no doubt, if the need arises."

One thing remained. Even as Curt stepped on the starter, McInnis lit the fuse to the charge of black powder that would blow the bridge behind them, and jumped to the running-board. He slid inside as the car shot off.

They'd covered half a kilometer when McInnis, eyes on his wrist, said: "Half a minute, Curt!"

They stopped the car, all three got out and stared back. The flames had spread to the trees, so that a pale lick of fire outlined the lower branches. The half-minute passed. A minute.

"Guessed wrong on the fuses," muttered Curt. "Or you didn't light them on the dot."

Toenjes had taken stock of his situation. He'd quit his animal-like spluttering by now and had thrust his head through a window of the car to stare toward the old hangars. And even the faint light of the stars showed the cold fury in his eyes.

Every second was a minute. Curt started to fill his pipe. Collins mopped his brow, hitched up his breeches. McInnis, to show his unconcern, popped a couple of sticks of gum into his mouth and started champing on them.

Then, before anyone could speak again, there came a dull, muffled explosion. In the light of the fire, the straight lines of the hangar buckled, the roof mushroomed—on one end. But the walls held together.

"One of the planes!"

"The completed one," added McInnis. "At least we got—"

The sentence was lost in another muffled explosion which merged instantly into a mighty, pulsating roar that made their eardrums ache, and the aërial bombs exploded by twos and threes a split second apart.

The ground, even at this distance, shook and rolled, and the three men staggered for balance. They saw a gigantic umbrella of fire shoot up from a flaming base. The entire copse of trees was lifted skyward. Hundreds of feet into the air shot a tremendous fountain of blaze dotted with débris, hanging there for an instant in midair; then, as in a slow-motion picture, it seemed to settle slowly, reluctantly, sending up innumerable small showers of flaming sparks.

Out on the flats, three breaths were expelled as one. Toenjes was hissing in short breaths through his gag. Curt was first to break the spell, and his voice sounded faint and distant.

"Well, that's that. Rest is up to you, Collins—to get them rounded up, whoever's left. Ryden and Lannestock were probably caught in that. You'll have to make sure. We've got Toenjes. And Montaya, he can't crawl out from under."

They turned to the car, but found it had been bounced from the rails. They hauled and tugged and lifted. Scarcely was it on the rails again when there came another explosion, closer at hand. The charge set under the bridge behind them had done its work. No motor car would be lifted across that drainage channel tonight.

"Hell, I'd forgotten that one," exclaimed McInnis.

He laughed. So did Curt and Collins, and it eased the tension. There was now no need for secrecy. They used the car lights and stepped on the gas. But thoughts of possible trouble ahead tightened their nerves again.

"We're safe enough till we get to Tempujo," said Curt. "This will have roused them there. Afraid they heard it in Soledad. Hope it doesn't worry Lee." He realized he was chattering and slowed his speech. "We'll ditch the car well outside of town and cut across country to the river, then make our way down the bank to Jerry's skiff. We can't be positive that holding Toenjes will get us through Tempujo. It'll be bad going."

Collins was talking too, more to himself than to the others. "Well, they can't radio out, or telephone, or use the railroad. Let's hope they can't fly out tonight. We'll get to Soledad at least by four. I'll have the *Comandante* rush soldiers to San Alejo at once, and I can have a couple of our planes up from the Canal by seven or eight."

Collins began to take some interest in his fellow passenger. He played his flash on Toenjes, and turned the man's head this way and that. A slow, unbelieving smile spread over Collins' face. He ripped open Toenjes' shirt and pulled it away from the shoulder. He found a puckered scar there, an old one. And then he began to laugh. The men in the front seat turned for an explanation.

"On a silver platter!" cried Collins. "Mr. Curtis, you've made one of the neatest hauls this year. Dr. Toenjes? I hadn't seen him before, you know. This is Herr Albrecht Werner Fisch, no less. Red-handed! One of the most important and slippery agents the Nazis have in Latin America."

"You sure?"

"I'll bet a month's pay. He dropped from sight over a year ago. Shave off this beard, and you'll find an uneven scar under the right jawline. He's really nearsighted, too. Didn't have to play-act that. Man, oh, man!"

The rails clanked faster than the tick of a watch. The speedometer climbed to forty, to fifty, and the car swayed from side to side. The black night, thicker than ever with the lights cutting a swath in front, rushed by at a furious pace. The passing of telephone poles became a steady *swish-swish*.

Curt was muttering again. "Wish I dared go faster." His thoughts were on Lee and the kids; on tomorrow—and tomorrow, and tomorrow.

AND then it was tomorrow. The sun slanted down hotly on the after deck of the *San Timoteo*. The Associated vessel was pushing her way north over a smooth sea. There was a cooling breeze, and cumulus clouds moved serenely across the sky.

Buddy, Chuck and Sylvia Mitchell were playing under the watchful eyes of the ship's nurse. Curt and Lee were standing by, his arm about her waist. They were silent, and Lee felt Curt's arm tighten as the children's voices rose shrilly, hilariously. She looked up and saw the look in his eyes, the beads of sweat on his upper lip, and she knew what he was thinking.

"Don't, dearest," she whispered. "Aren't we all safe and sound? If there's any fault, it's mine. You'd have stayed home if I'd said to."

He looked down at her, and his eyes cleared. He kissed her lightly, and they sauntered off. At the entrance to the central staircase he paused.

"I could do with another nap," he said. "And you?"

"We slept all morning!" she said accusingly. "But you go ahead. Oh, look, they're tacking up a bulletin."

The bulletin-board was on the wall outside the purser's office on this cross corridor. They went to it.

"Puerto Soledad, Tierra Libre," read the radio news dispatch. "In a raid by Army troops on the headquarters of the Compañia Agrícola Tropical at San Alejo this morning, what appears to have been a direct Nazi plot against the sovereignty of Tierra Libre was disclosed, with the arrest of Señor Apolonio Montaya and twenty-four persons of doubtful nationality."

THE END

Three short complete novels are scheduled for our next issue. (See inside back cover.)

REAL EXPERIENCES*

Lanky Bob Got Mad

A cub reporter quoted the wrong Fitzsimmons about that famous solar plexus blow.

By SAMUEL ELLSWORTH KISER

WHEN Bob Fitzsimmons' show opened for a week in Cleveland, I was a young reporter there, working on an evening paper. A part of my job was to make a round of the hotels daily, endeavoring to get interviews with visiting celebrities, if there were any in town, and picking up such news as I could.

Fitzsimmons had caused one of the worst upsets in the history of prize-fighting when he won the heavyweight championship from Jim Corbett, back in the allegedly "gay" Nineties. Fitzsimmons was really a middleweight. From the waist up he was built like a gorilla, but his legs were spindly, and he was generally believed to be outclassed by "Gentleman Jim."

Corbett was the most scientific boxer of his time; he had whipped the great John L. Sullivan; he was twenty-five pounds heavier than "Lanky Bob," and nobody doubted his gameness. In the fight between the two men at Carson City, Nev., a blow on Corbett's solar plexus caused him to crumple in agony, and he lay writhing in the ring while being counted out.

Few followers of prize-fighting had known prior to that time that there was any such thing as a solar plexus. For months following the fight, it was mentioned in newspapers and elsewhere about as frequently as the *blitzkrieg* has been recently.

Fitzsimmons had been a blacksmith before he turned to fighting for a living. Immediately after he had won the championship a play was written for him, and he made a tour of the country, exhibiting himself as a brawny worker at the anvil. With a forge rigged up on the stage, he would shape a glowing horseshoe in full sight of his wondering admirers.

I had seen pictures of Fitzsimmons and read descriptions of him. He was red-headed, partly bald, and freckled. Although he was an Australian, he spoke with a cockney accent, and he had a surly disposition. His manager shielded him from reporters, and did all the talking for him.

On my way into the Kennard House that Monday when Fitzsimmons and his company were to begin their Cleveland engagement I had one of the big thrills of my life. There he sat in a corner of the lobby, and all alone! What a chance, I thought, to get his own version of his fight with Corbett. To get him to talk freely, without his manager present to stop him, would be something worth boasting about.

As I approached him he gave me an unfriendly look, but I hitched up my courage, told him I was a reporter, and said I would like to write something about his show. He waited for me to go on. By way of getting the conversation started, I made up a nice little fib, to the effect that I had won five dollars by betting on him when he had fought with Corbett. Going on from there, I asked whether he had been afraid, after hitting Corbett on the solar plexus, that he might have killed him.

"Nah!" he said. "These blokes wot try to make out I 'it 'im there tryin' to kill 'im make me sick. I never 'eard of a solar plexus till after I 'ad 'im licked."

"How did you manage to land your punch at that particular spot?" I asked.

"It just 'appened," he said. "When these raw uns that come up on the stage to box with me in the show try to be smart I taps 'em on the solar, but it was a bit o' luck I 'ad with Corbett. I was aimin' at 'is belly, and 'e run into it."

There was my story. The rest of the interview didn't matter. An admission from Fitzsimmons that his victory over Corbett was accidental would cause a sensation in the sporting world. I had sudden ideas of splendid offers coming to me from New York and Chicago papers. Leaving the freckled gentleman as quickly and gracefully as I could, I rushed to the office of the Cleveland *Press*, and got busy with my pencil.

"Are you sure he said it just this way?" the city editor asked when he had read the story I handed him.

I assured him that I had quoted the fighter's exact words, and the interview was published under liberal headlines in an early edition of the paper. I was reading it proudly when Fitzsimmons and his manager came into the editorial office, both fighting mad. Sudden horror fell upon me when I saw them. In spite of the efforts of the pugilist's manager to do the talking, Fitzsimmons announced his intention of licking "the bloke wot put that lie in the paper."

I shrank as far as I could into a corner behind a desk while the managing editor, the city editor, and several men from the composing-room adjoining the editorial office surrounded our visitors. Bob Paine, the editor-in-chief, armed with a rusty harpoon which some whaling captain had given him as a souvenir, stood near the group.

The fighter's manager said Fitz was not stopping at the Kennard House, had not been there, and had seen no reporter. He demanded a retraction of the solar plexus story, and an apology. While the matter was being argued I came out of my corner to tell Bob Paine that I had been imposed upon, and that Fitzsimmons was not the man whom I had interviewed. With that cleared up, he promised to have the story killed and to publish an apology, arguing that the episode would be used to advantage in giving the pugilist's show some good free advertising.

Both the manager and Fitzsimmons began to see it that way, and they departed finally without the spilling of any blood.

When I returned to the Kennard House in search of the man whom I had interviewed he was gone. The clerk there told me he was a traveling shoe-salesman who was often mistaken for Fitzsimmons, and was finding amusement in letting people think he was the fighter.

It may have been fun for him, but a punch on my solar plexus could hardly have made me feel worse than I did when I saw the real lanky Bob.

* BLUE BOOK is glad to receive and to print true stories of real experience, running from one thousand to four thousand words each. For each of those accepted each month we will pay, according to our appraisal of its length and strength, an average price of $50. Manuscripts should be addressed to the Real Experience Editor, the Blue Book Magazine, 230 Park Ave., New York.

"I've Been Hungry Myself"

He found a famous outlaw running a small-town restaurant.

by **R. L. SPEARS**

I ROLLED into a village in the prairie homestead country that ought never to have been taken from cattle-ranch occupation, a land of good pasture and profitless agriculture, long afterward called "marginal land"—a dust-bowl, in the region where a great poet said the West begins. I was sifting rumors and traditions in the Western scene, and carried a portable typewriter on my motorcycle handlebars, and a notebook in which I wrote "observations" and preserved other men's memories of cowhair days.

I stopped at a small hotel on a dusty small-town street. In the restaurant a buxom waitress brought a pitcher of water and handed me a menu. The top dish was "Beef Stew, 15 cts." I said I'd start with that.

"Start with it?" She smiled, oddly.

Within ten minutes she put down a long bowl full of two-inch cubes of beef, potatoes, carrots, turnip, cabbage—nearly two quarts. Also she put down a Vienna loaf of bread more than a foot long and six inches wide in the center. Hard as hardtack, it was fine; I was hungry; and I had a full meal—for fifteen cents.

The restaurant proprietor was big, burly, blue-eyed, scarred by fights. Bowlegged, an old-timer—no man to prod with personal, intimate inquiries. I had to earn the story of the fifteen-cent meal with patience and circumvention. I made notes for a hundred stories before I got to the one I wanted. Ten days after arriving in town, I ventured to ask the proprietor what kind of weather it was, and he told me his cows out on other people's abandoned homesteads were doing good. He told me I ought to look at his herd—seven hundred head or so—over by the river.

Then I remarked that every time I bought that first dish on the menu, beef, Mulligan, mutton, jackrabbit or whatever, I got so darned much soup I could hardly eat it all, big as I was, good as was my appetite.

"None of my business—but it's such good eating for so little—I was just wondering, that's all."

"Yes," he said, "fifteen cents—if you've got it. If you aint got but seven cents, you lay it on the line, and the woman'll give you two cents change. But if you're flat, if you aint got a red copper cent, you go over to the post office. You pick up an envelope somebody's throwed down—one with a two-cent stamp on it—canceled, understand! You brush it off, kinda clean. You tear it off careful—kinda straight on the edges. You come and lay that on the line—you know, the counter!—and that girl'll give you the same meal as you gotta pay fifteen cents for, if you got it! You see—well, my boy, I've been hungry myself."

A man who'd been hungry—and remembering it, never knowingly let another man leave his place needing food, merely because he couldn't pay for it! This was a fine starting-point for a story—but years went by and I couldn't work up that idea, right. . . .

During the World War No. 1, men long outlawed because they had disobeyed criminals who had feathered their nests under pretense of official action, volunteered—as other desperadoes had done during the war to free Cuba. A great barrier of patriotism rose to destroy the old-time feuds, wrongs and bitter antagonisms. One day a man wrote to ask me if I could tell what became of the Hole-in-the-Wall outlaws. I had quite a bit of incidental data about them, and presently he told me about a booklet issued by the Pinkertons telling about outlaws of the hold-up type. Through a police chief, then secretary of the New York police association, I obtained a copy of this booklet by William Pinkerton. Among the illustrations was the proprietor of that restaurant where a hungry man could always get a full meal, even though he couldn't pay more than a canceled postage-stamp torn from a discarded envelope at the post office.

Bill Cruzan! Long since he had discarded his own name. At the Big Timbers in Montana he had with other wild youngsters interrupted the passage of a train—and fled the scene, riding for days and nights, pursued by railroad, express-company, sheriff and other posses. Train-robbers lived desperate lives—a few minutes of wild excitement, and then year-long skulking and long riding from the Canadian fur-country to the Straits of Magellan far down the Argentine. Cruzan was caught and checked out of the scene.

When he left the bullpen, he figured it didn't pay to go against the majority. A good eater, he checked against his wild adventures the long days and nights when all a man could get to eat was perhaps a jackrabbit, roots dug in the pastures, berries off bushes, even prairie dogs—not enough of them!

In cow-towns he saw that the proprietors of lunches, restaurants, feeding-hotels and resorts always had something to eat. He rode into a boom town and established a restaurant and hotel, and a policy of feeding the hungry who came to his doors. With the identification of that old boy came the recognition of others around his establishment, though not all of them.

Bill Cruzan, Harvey Logan, Bob Leigh—one odd slant was that when Harvey Logan was caught in Knoxville, Tenn., December 15, 1901, I was coming down the Little Holston and Big Holston in a skiff—and I started for the jail to see him a few days later. On a hunch, I didn't go. Dozens of detectives came from all over the United States to see this most desperately reckless of the Wild Bunch of the Hole-in-the-Wall. I was tripping in a five-dollar skiff, dressed in bicycle breeches. When I met him in the last rendezvous of the Wild Bunch I was still in short pants, riding a motorcycle. "Ho law! Aint that the bigges' small boy yo' eveh did get to see?" If I'd seen Logan in Knoxville, or rather if he'd seen me, what would have happened to me in Bill Cruzan's?

As it was, a stay of weeks with that old boy, keeping notes, writing down remarks, incidents, observations—twenty years of casual and persistant keeping track all came to a head. The chance of a fifteen-cent dish on a restaurant menu brought together more than a hundred pages of first-hand notes collected from the mountains of Tennessee, the Missouri River headwaters, the Old Thief Trail across Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and a chance talk with an old-timer on the transcontinental Ocean to Ocean trail.

Cruzan died in the early 1920's.

A FIFTEEN-CENT meal—all a hungry man could eat!—was a real adventure. The scope of the meal reached literally from the Milk River Basin to the far end of the South American Continent. An estimate of the episodes, incidents, activities, the spread of the circumstances implicated with that beef stew and Vienna loaf is almost impossible to make. Nevertheless a score of books, hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles, an enormous miscellany indicate many more than a thousand prime incidents and occasions, all of them directly leading to or from that restaurant menu on which was one dish, the equivalent of a full meal, which could be bought for fifteen cents, or a two-cent canceled postage-stamp. And that old boy, blue-eyed, scarred and smiling, sure said an earful when he explained the underlying motive:

"My boy, I've been hungry myself."

Free of Fear and Hunger,

We've had many stories by torpedoed mariners, but this one has a quality all its own.

THE submarine opened fire on us outside the war zone. We were 220 miles off the west coast of Africa and at least 120 miles away from any steamship lanes. The *Charles Pratt* was a neutral ship, with Panama colors painted all over her decks and sides. Except for a Dane, a Norwegian and an Argentinian, all of the forty-two men aboard were American citizens.

The *Charles Pratt* was a Standard Oil tanker under Captain Eric Blomquist of Maryland. We had sailed out of Norfolk, Virginia, the first of December. We stopped at Aruba in the Dutch West Indies to pick up a cargo of crude oil, and then bore east to Africa. All the way across the Atlantic we painted the ship, and on the 21st of December the job was finished. In some curious way it gave us a sense of security against attack.

At noon on the 21st I went off watch and turned in. At three o'clock there was a deafening explosion that sounded like dynamite blowing up a forest of stumps. My upper bunk collapsed, and I slid onto the fo'c'stle deck. The bunks and lockers were a shambles. I thought at first that one of the boilers had blown, and I wasn't greatly worried.

The best protection against a torpedo is a state of complete relaxation. The men who were sleeping didn't get a scratch. But up on deck, where some seamen were arguing over coffee, all hell broke loose. The men were thrown around in every direction. One of them apparently became frenzied with excitement. He screamed, "I'm getting off!" and he jumped overboard. He was never seen again.

Those of us who were below-decks scrambled up the companionway. We were in all stages of undress. Coming out on deck we couldn't see our hands in front of us, through the solid sheet of black oil raining down. The torpedo had hit two feet below the waterline, a few feet abaft the pump-room. The radio antenna was smashed. We couldn't send out an SOS. The deck was ripped wide open. A fire was spreading, and every man of us was covered from stem to stern with crude oil.

You do foolish things in such a situation. I dived through the oil to go below and change from a pair of good pajamas to a pair of ragged dungarees. I collected my sailing-papers, and then noticed my brand-new shoes lying on top of the rubble that had been bunks. I started to put the shoes on. Then I realized that they would get soiled from the oil on my feet. It was hard to think of those fine tan shoes covered with black oil. So I took them off, leaving them to sink in the Atlantic, and departed barefoot.

We had four lifeboats, but we could launch only two because the others were on the starboard side where the torpedo had struck, and now a fire was raging. Some of us hastily lowered the boats; the rest of the crew opened the smothering valves and shot steam into the burning tanks.

Thirty-nine men tumbled into the two lifeboats. (They could have accommodated six or eight each, comfortably.) Three of the crew were missing. One had jumped overboard into the grinding jaws of the propeller. The first mate and an ordinary seaman had been in direct line of the torpedo and had disappeared. We pulled away without them, less than half an hour after the torpedo hit us.

I glanced back at the *Charles Pratt*, and in that instant I saw her lifted again from the water, her tanks blowing up and belching black oil in all directions.

We pulled away from the ship, planning to circle round it searching for the missing men until dark. Then both boats would return. If the *Pratt* was still afloat, we would fix up the radio and try to sail her into Freetown. If that was impossible, at least we'd gather up a few supplies.

We had been rowing for about an hour when we saw first mate Hans Engelson swimming toward us, through the thick scum of oil on the waves. He had been swimming around in the oil, broken ribs and all, ever since he was blown off the deck. The Captain's lifeboat picked him up. He was deposited gently on the bottom, where he remained until a British ship rescued that lifeboat four days later. We never found the other two men.

At dusk we were rowing silently back toward the tanker, when suddenly out of the night somebody in the other boat whistled. The Old Man gave orders to ship our oars. Over there next to the *Charles Pratt* two blue lights were glowing evilly in the darkness, and we saw the shifting outlines of a submarine.

So our friends had also waited for dusk! They finished up the nasty job of torpedoing a neutral ship by hijacking the ship's supplies. Those blue lights hovering over our ship had a strangely infuriating effect. We wanted to engage the trespasser with our bare fists and seabiscuits for weapons. The Old Man, a tanker captain for eighteen years, had the same impulse, but he curbed it and ordered us to come about again and head for Africa. . . .

The days were warm and the sea was calm. Our rations were half a pint of water a day, and seabiscuits. (We couldn't eat many of these, as they made us thirsty.) The sleeping arrangements were awkward. When we slept, we simply released the oars and remained in our places, leaning against each other. We were overloaded and the boat rode very low in the water.

It wasn't comfortable, but we all felt wonderful at first.

The crew of twenty in my lifeboat had signed on the *Pratt* from all corners of the Norfolk waterfront. There were several landlubbers among them, who were without any sense of seamen's traditions and were unused to hardships of any sort. Two were worse than useless. We finally stowed them in the bottom of the boat and left them there for the duration. The bosun and third mate took turns at the helm, and the rest of us were divided into four crews of four each at the oars, relieving each other every half-hour.

We had no hats, and the steady heat of the white sun was like a weight on our brains. So we went shares on all the shirts and shorts aboard. These we dipped in oil and wrapped turban-like around our heads. The crude oil that covered our bodies was efficient protection against sunburn. Most of us were of Scandinavian stock, with the thin skin that normally turns the color of boiled lobster after five minutes of strong sunshine. With a coating of crude oil, five days in an open boat under a blistering tropical sun made us handsome figures of a gratifying golden tan.

Other things were not so gratifying. Our two lifeboats stayed together for three days and nights, the men rowing doggedly on a calm sea, and the sails sagging listlessly. Then the ocean roughened, a stiff breeze came up and the sails bellied out. We dropped the oars and set a course due east. Leaving the third mate to steer, the rest of us in my boat dropped off to sleep. We were worn out with rowing, and slept the deep sleep of fatigue and relief. Hours later I woke up and noticed that the sun was in the wrong place. Our boat was alone. We were scudding along under full sail straight for the shores of South America.

Suspicion and Hate!

By
NORVAL GRANNEBERG

The bosun by popular consent took the command. We lowered the sail and started pulling the oars for Africa once more. We rowed all that night and all the next day, but still we didn't find the skipper's lifeboat.

On Christmas day, when the water supply was getting dangerously low, a merchant ship hove into view. We waved our shirt-turbans and yelled hallelujah. The ship came toward us, shied off, zigzagged around, and stopped two or three times. Then she sailed away. We decided to keep our shirts on our heads in the future.

This mystery ship looked like a passenger steamer, but was apparently an enemy surface raider. She was never reported at Freetown, and was never seen again. But even a Britisher might have behaved toward us in the same cavalier fashion. Subs follow lifeboats, and sometimes set them adrift to trap unwary Allied ships.

By Christmas night we estimated that we must have reached the steamer lanes. It was a black cold night, and we were huddled together on the hard seats trying to keep warm. About one o'clock in the morning I saw, not farther than a quarter-mile away, a shrouded flashlight signaling in Morse code. The light appeared directly over the water, and the night was so inky that the vessel may have been a rowboat, a submarine or a battleship for all we could tell. It was a prickly sensation, sitting there exposed in our little boat under the lighted lantern on the mast, knowing we were being watched and not knowing by whom or what, not even knowing how prolonged the observation had been. Our bosun signaled back with the flashlight that is part of every lifeboat's standard equipment. No response came for fifteen minutes, when suddenly the light appeared again from an entirely different position. We answered their questions, told them who we were, and sat back to wait. We waited all night. The light never flashed again, and by dawn there was just the wide empty sweep of ocean around us. We had been abandoned by another ship.

We were getting pretty gloomy toward the end of the fifth day out. Our little boat crawled along in a worried silence, which was broken only by the creaking of the oars. The men were beginning to look gaunt and hollow-eyed and thirsty. Some of us were trying to catch a fish with a sea-biscuit attached to the buckle on the end of a belt. (Sharks had followed us continuously, frolicking and sliding under the shadows cast by the boat, but only lately had schools of small fish appeared.) When a large steamer came over the horizon, we just stared at it sourly and continued fishing. I guess we were beyond excitement.

But the ship miraculously stopped about a mile to starboard and waited for us to pull up alongside her. She was an armed British freighter, the *Langlee Gorse,* out of Australia and bound for Freetown, Sierra Leone. Her crew helped us get aboard. We climbed over the rail, staggered drunkenly to the hatch and collapsed. We were so used to cramped quarters and the roll of the small boat that we couldn't stand up. Then somebody gave us each a glass of brandy which, taken on empty stomachs, promptly knocked us out.

When we came to, we learned that the flashlight which had passed us the night before was in reality a British tanker out of Freetown and headed for South Africa. She had signaled to the *Langlee Gorse* to watch for us.

Freetown now has a full-fledged war boom. Butter is rationed and beer is an extravagant luxury. We were the only Americans in the city.

It is hard to imagine the desperate plight of British merchant shipping until one has actually seen a British harbor. Men-of-war are not available for use as escorts, and as the submarine warfare intensifies, convoys become more and more poorly protected. Once I saw a convoy of forty-five ships leave Freetown, escorted by a single small armed trawler.

The crew of the *Charles Pratt* recovered very quickly from the ill effects of their days in the lifeboats. The skipper's boat was out only four days when a British ship rescued them. He and his mates were waiting on the jetty to welcome us when we came in.

The crew of the *Pratt* had very little money, but the company paid our room and board. We signed chits for beer and recreation, and by payday we owed as much as we had drawn from the company and so we began signing chits again. We read all the old issues of *Punch* and the London illustrated dailies, and circulated fabulous rumors among ourselves of first-class transportation being arranged to take us home. All the ships we might have caught were filled with missionaries leaving Africa. All American ships were booked up in advance for a year and a half.

About the start of March, twenty-eight of us (including Captain Blomquist) signed on as penny-a-month "work-aways" on the S.S. *Standard,* which had got through to Freetown with a cargo of oil. The rest of the crew went to Lisbon, where they are still hoping to find a ship.

The Old Man had been dignified and resourceful throughout the submarine attack and everything that came after. Throughout our sojourn in Africa he was the Man Who Could Meet Emergencies and Come Out on Top. On the day that we were scheduled to leave Freetown he stood there in front of us, a big blond Swede, and shouted "All together now!" while we sang "God Bless America" at the top of our lungs.

And suddenly we realized that we were really going home. On the way out to the *Standard* we celebrated by tossing our topees (those pith helmets without which a white man in Africa becomes a low and suspicious character) high in the air over the harbor. This sacrilege blenched the faces of the native oarsmen, but made the Englishmen back on the jetty look after us wistfully.

The *Standard* took us as far as Aruba in the Dutch West Indies. There, three of us transferred immediately to the tanker *Prometheus* bound for the States.

When we reached New York it was almost April. We looked like a party of hoboes who had been wintering in Florida. We were given a bonus to cover the loss of our clothing, and full salary for the four months we'd been gone. I walked away from the ship and passed a hamburger stand and I could smell the good beef and the sizzling, unrationed butter. From the juke-box inside floated the strains of something that sounded like "a little piggy going boogy-woogy." My pockets were full of money. It seemed as though all the people on the street looked happy. I guessed this was because their expressions were free of fear and hunger and suspicion and hate. . . .

I'm leaving for Freetown again soon for another try at getting a cargo of oil through to the British. They need it more than we do. And anyway, it strikes me that it's worth taking a long chance against a torpedo just to keep those expressions on the faces of Americans for a little while longer.

Fight Above the Desert

Sandstorms and vast distances make the air war in North Africa a special hazard.

RALPH MICHAELIS

THERE'S plenty of variety in open warfare for a fighter pilot. When an army is on the move, there are troop transports, and other enemy aircraft in the air; and tanks, motor transports and a diversity of targets on the ground, such as one had hardly dared to hope for.

I mention this, because ordinarily a fighter pilot spends three-quarters of his time in looking for trouble. In fact, it is possible, especially for a pilot new to operational flying, to get into a dogfight and out again without ever seeing an enemy aircraft. Speeds are so tremendous that you can be out of sight of the enemy within a minute or two of breaking off an engagement.

But there were no complaints about the monotony among us fighter pilots in the Western Desert while the Germans were on the move.

I was out on patrol alone in my Hurricane one morning when I spotted four black specks the size of flies in my distance, and a couple of thousand feet above me. I climbed into the sun, so as to avoid being seen by them, and then turned to investigate them. The air was tremendously bumpy, for the hot air of a tropical morning rising from the desert after the chill of the night was tossing my Hurricane all over the place.

Terrific bumps were pounding it like Atlantic rollers as I gave chase to those black specks, which soon loomed up to disclose themselves as JU-52 three-engined German troop-carriers.

By that time I had the height over them, and apparently they hadn't seen me. I picked the rearmost Junkers, dived on his tail, and gave him a burst of fire that sent him to the ground in a slow drunken spin, with smoke pouring out of him.

As I swept away in a climbing turn, the other three spotted me and closed into a tight echelon formation and swung all their guns round onto me, zigzagging like blazes to put me off my aim. This was a wise move: If they had scattered, they would have been cold meat for the much faster and more heavily armed Hurricane.

I attacked from the starboard side of the formation next, diving on the right wing man, and giving him a burst that opened up his fuselage like a tin-opener from the tail to the nose. It killed the gunner, and either killed the pilot too, or smashed the controls—for the JU flapped over ponderously onto its back, and then dived itself upside down into the ground.

The next time I dived to attack, the remaining two Junkers were diving down to land as far as they could go, and I ran into such a patch of bumps that they put me clean off my aim. One of them gave me such a kick under the port wing that it nearly turned me over. Maybe it was just as well, because the tracer from the Jerry guns was flashing past me as I bucked and skidded over the bumps.

The next time I came round, they had landed; so I had a good look round for their usual fighter escort. But finding that they were unaccompanied, I went down and gave them the rest of my ammunition on the ground, before flying home.

VISIBILITY in the desert can be very good or it can be appallingly bad. When it is good, you can see quite clearly for a hundred miles and more. In a sandstorm it is as thick as a Midlands fog over a blast furnace, and about as hot. But always where there is movement, clouds of dust rise from the ground.

After a time you can pretty well judge the type of transport and the size of the column from the dust that you can see from up above. One afternoon I was leading a section when my No. 2 called out over the telephone that he had spotted a big cloud of dust.

I diagnosed a big motorized column from the dust they were kicking up. These columns often have a fighter escort hanging around in the air above them, so I left one man up on top, to watch out for a possible escort, and dived to the attack with the rest of the section.

The column halted in a great hurry as we went screaming down on them, and German troops tumbled out and started to scatter. By the time we had come down a second time, several lorries were on fire. We gave the vehicles another burst and sprayed the running Germans, tumbling them over like ninepins.

The third time we went down, a machine-gun crew had a gun mounted and were gamely firing at us. Luckily I noticed them as we went down and knocked them and their gun flying.

Then having finished our ammunition, we flew home, leaving half a dozen lorries in flames, and a good many more disabled. . . .

I think a convoy of oil tankers makes the best sort of blaze in the desert. Naturally they prefer to move by night; but if they are obliged to move in the daytime, and you happen to catch them, they make a nice bonfire.

I was flying with another fellow one day when we spotted some of them on the move. I don't know if their engines were kicking up so much row that they didn't hear us coming; but we were on them before they had seen us, and they were traveling at a good lick.

The result was that when the second tanker turned over and burst into flames, the one following crashed into it, and also caught on fire. Then the column stopped in a great hurry.

We were coming down for a second attack when, out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a formation of German fighters coming down on our tails. I shouted a warning to the other pilot, and we went round in a climbing turn as they thundered past, pulled out of their dive, and zoomed up again to try and get on our tails.

There were six of them against two of us; and they were pretty good. We hadn't a lot of ammunition left; so, not wanting to waste it, we got into a right circle, one behind the other when they attacked, and kept turning.

This worried the Germans quite a bit. They couldn't turn in anything like as tight a circle as we could in our Hurricanes, and we offered them a very poor target, turning in circles on our wing-tips. It was like a heavy-weight chasing a bantam round a boxing ring. He hits out with a terrific punch, and the bantam is on the other side of the ring before it arrives.

The German fighters kept diving on us three at a time. In fact, they kept diving on the rearmost machine of us, and that happened to be mine.

I did not want to fire back and waste any of our precious ammunition until I was sure of a hit, so I bided my time. All at once one of the three diving on me miscalculated his dive, nearly collided with his stable companion, who had to dodge to avoid him, and in doing so nearly stalled. I was out of the circle and onto that bandit's tail in a flash. I gave him a burst before he could recover, and he went hurtling into the ground.

The others seemed discouraged, and beetled off home—which was as well for us; because we hadn't a hundred rounds of ammunition left between us!

Readers' Forum*

(Continued from page 1)

do not claim the first copy, I do not think I am far behind.

I have been reading your magazine since 1906 or 7 with very few copies missed. When I could only have one magazine, BLUE BOOK *it was and since the first copy, thirty-five years ago, I have enjoyed and read each issue thoroughly.*

Keep right on going and by all means have an "Old-timers Memories" contest. The number of old readers may surprise you.

How about some more of the "Diplomatic Free Lance" type of fiction and skip a few of the murder mystery stories. Like Flight Surgeon Moore, that is my only criticism of the most widely read and thumb-marked magazine in our barracks.

Yours for more good reading.
Nelson G. Moffitt,
Master Sgt.,
Fort Dix, New Jersey.

A BLUE BOOKWORM

Poverty during the last eight of my fifty-five years has precluded such luxuries as magazine subscriptions. Reading matter is a sine qua non *in my remote mountainous Mexico. The nearest railroad is three days' ride along rough trails on a mule's hurricane deck. I have no radio.*

An insatiable appetite for reading matter plus poverty have converted me into a shameless magazine bum. (Magazine, shameless bum.) Last year a friend sent my first BLUE BOOK. *The initial installment of a Punic Wars story entranced me, and this Blue Bookworm was born. Second and third issues were bummed successfully; the last and fate of* the Stork, Ramnes, *and lovely* Drusilla *still eludes me.*

This sort of thing mustn't happen again. I saved one hundred nickels. Last month BLUE BOOK *plastered them over my subscription. Now I'm safe for months.*

Why, from among different types sent by friends, should I pick out and pay *for this particular magazine? Perhaps 140,000 words of clean, thrilling, high-class literature determined it.*

Editors prefer authors' manuscripts mailed flat, I understand: this *reader prefers editors' magazines mailed flat,* you *understand. The worm turns, mildly critical.* Adios.

Thos. W. Cousen,
Chinipas, Chihuahua, Mexico.

*The Editors of BLUE BOOK are glad to receive letters of constructive criticism and suggestion; for the ones we publish each month we will pay the writers ten dollars each.

Letters should not be longer than two hundred words; no letters can be returned, and all will become property of McCall Corporation. They should be addressed: Editor of Letters, Blue Book Magazine, 230 Park Ave., New York.

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